

CASE STUDY: RESEARCH

Home Zones Initiative

Mike Biddulph provides a more detailed account of research being undertaken into the British interpretation of the Dutch woonerf

In 1998 the Children's Play Council launched its "Home Zone" initiative. This is an initiative to promote residential streets that are designed firstly for the needs of resident pedestrians and cyclists, and only secondly for the needs of the car.

Subsequently the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has started to monitor the development of nine pilot projects around the country. It will not provide additional funding to implement the concept, although local authorities can use funding from existing regeneration initiatives. The monitoring is being undertaken by the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL). In monitoring the new Home Zones, TRL and the government are interested to see how the development of Home Zones influences a number of things including street activity, fear of strangers, scope for social contact, house prices, use of public transport, and use of the spaces by certain social groups (especially children and the elderly). In addition to the pilot projects a number of other authorities have initiated Home Zone schemes, including three projects in Bristol.

Lessons from existing Home Zones

The Home Zone is not a new concept in Britain despite all the current attention. The Brow in Runcorn (1969) (see photo), for example, has many of the shared surface characteristics sought by the promoters of the concepts, whilst it is also possible to find other established new build schemes such as, for example, the unadopted shared surfaces of the Old Royal Free Square, Islington, London (1987), or more recently the edge of town centre housing at Oldbrook 2 in Milton Keynes (1992). In addition a large number of local authorities have initiated Home Zone schemes as part of regeneration initiatives, many using Urban Programme funding. Notable schemes referred to elsewhere include: Parkdale West and Parkdale East in Wolverhampton; Worthington Street in Leicester; Glebe and Gilberts Streets in Barry; Rhymney Street in Cardiff; Alma, Derby, and Lancaster Streets and Waterloo Road in Barnsley; and more recently Centre 8 at Castle Vale in Birmingham. In addition Mews Courts and shared surface cul-de-sacs have been a feature of private sector residential layouts since the 1970s.

Typically local authorities have not carefully monitored the success of the environments, although those contacted could say that, beyond the initial expense, there have been no significant additional costs associated with special surface treatments or low maintenance landscaping. It is possible to find accident statistics which provide evidence of how safe Home Zones have been, but it is also possible to note problems with illegal parking and subsequent access difficulties faced by emergency services, some poor maintenance or loss of soft landscaping, and the impacts on established environments of growing levels of car ownership or changing tenure patterns. Most critical from these previous examples has been the obvious lesson that despite the existence of the concept it has only been applied where funding opportunities have allowed, typically restricting the use of the concept in existing housing areas to limited projects benefitting from urban regeneration funds. To-date there has been no evidence of commitment to a more wide ranging strategy and without this and a more committed source of financing it seems obvious that the Home Zone concept will not be implemented more widely.

The government's monitoring is clearly focussed on careful analysis of a small number of schemes, and its focus is only on the environmental performance of

the projects. It does not really address the major stumbling blocks associated with more wide ranging adoption of the concept. To this end it was interesting to explore what various professional agencies knew and subsequently thought about the concept. Local authority highway engineers, housing associations, and private sector house builders were subsequently contacted to determine their views.

36 agencies responded to the request for information, including 8 of the largest housing associations, 11 of the largest private housebuilding companies, 12 local authorities and 5 other interested organisations. The results demonstrate a range of opinions about the concept and its value, although it is fair to say that most respondents were positive. To pick up a few of the concerns, engineers were typically concerned about the costs of both consultation and development, the commitment of time to the work and the lack of a legal status for Home Zones. Housing Associations had concerns about maintenance, the need for higher service charges and resident conflicts over childrens play or damage to vehicles. Developers were concerned that Home Zones should not have an impact on the availability of car parking, that consumers may not understand and therefore be put off the product, that schemes will be more complicated to design, that landscaping may be more costly and that surfaces, when proposed, will not be readily adopted. Collectively the respondents expressed concern that the British public would not understand the concept, and that some means for making the public more aware of the Home Zone option should be found.

Concepts from Netherlands and Germany

In addition to concerns about planning, developing and subsequently managing the Home Zone environment, there is also a need to explore the opportunity that Home Zones represents in terms of urban design. To this end there has also been discussion about design principles that might be adopted by Local Authorities to help designers and developers translate the

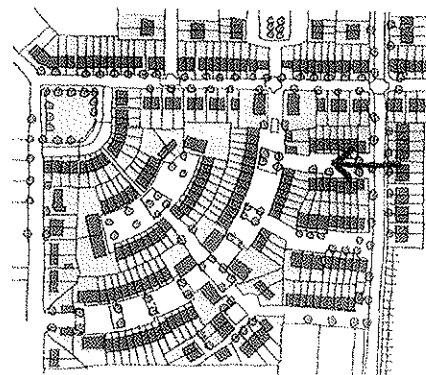
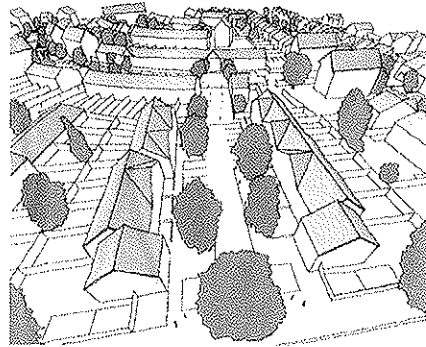
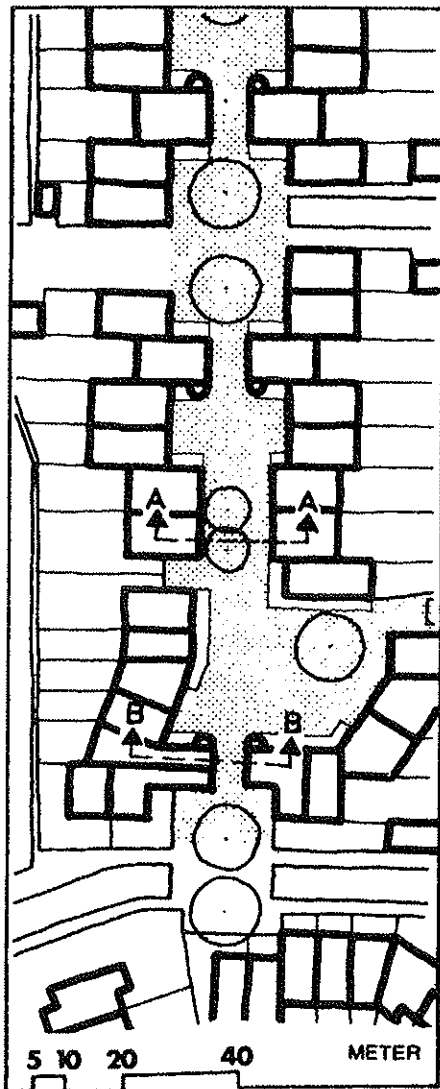
Right: The Brow, Runcorn illustrating the shared surface nature of access within the scheme



concept into actual schemes. Research has also, therefore, started to explore the types of guidance used for this purpose in the Netherlands and Germany. This provides clues about a variety of things including: the essential principles that help to define what a Home Zone might be; the sorts of area considered appropriate for treatment; the range of layout concepts that might be adopted (see plan); or the detailed dimensions subsequently used for access arrangements or managing parking.

Learning from Practice

Finally any practitioner knows that the actual experience of trying to plan, design and develop schemes offers key lessons about the utility of a design concept. To this end the experience of trying to develop Home Zones in Bristol has also provided clues as to the viability of the concept, and this process is currently also being monitored. Bristol has been promoting three schemes: one in an existing area with an established population (Henbury); one small new-build scheme being promoted by a housing association (Birdale Close); and one larger public/private partnership scheme including just over 300 units (Horfield)(see plans). Schemes have been devised for all three areas but in each case the costs of developing the concept might become prohibitive, whilst in Henbury the consultation process generated quite a few negative comments about some Home Zone features such as seating or play equipment. In each case, and for slightly different reasons, the ambitions of the original schemes are being limited, possibly even to the point where it must be said that what might result will be a traffic calming scheme rather than a Home Zone, even if it is referred to as a Home Zone by name. Bristol is also exploring the institutional and political implications of implementing the concept. It has established a part-time Home Zone Officer to coordinate its initiative, and the authority is also starting to promote the concept through seminars and events with officers and members. This highlights the complexity, even for one organisation, of trying to develop the concept beyond a few "one off" schemes. To date it is too early to say what the ultimate results of Bristol's considerable efforts might be, but it is interesting to note what can be achieved away from the spotlight of the government's rather cautious initiative.



Above: Layout concept for the Horfield Home Zone in north Bristol for Bristol City Council

Above: One of 10 Home Zone layout concepts for residential areas from Forschungsgesellschaft fuer Strassen- und Verkehrswesen (1985) *Empfehlungen fuer die Anlage von Erschliessungsstrassen* (Recommendations for the Design of Newly Developed Streets), Bonn Kirschbaum Verlag

Further information on the current Home Zone initiative and the nine pilot projects is on: <http://www.homezones.org>. #