



# ABBNEY ORCHARD ESTATE

# *Contents*

A background and commentary on the project

Sustainability

Being an exemplar

Public participation and community engagement

Awareness-raising

## *A background and commentary on the project*

Peabody are recognised worldwide for their leadership in creating and managing innovative and groundbreaking social housing. Their work ethos is grounded in and motivated by the philosophy of its Founder, George Peabody (1795 - 1869).

Peabody, an American banker, is the acknowledged father of modern philanthropy and cared deeply about the poor. Many have followed in his footsteps; Johns Hopkins, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller and Bill Gates.

In 1862, Peabody established the Peabody Donation Fund in London, which continues to this day as Peabody. Its original aim was to provide good quality housing “for the deserving poor”. The first dwellings opened by Peabody for the “artisans and labouring poor of London”, were opened in Commercial Street, Whitechapel in February 1864. They

were designed by the architect H.A. Darbishire in an attractively ornate style, that private clients came to desire.

Abbey Orchard as part of Peabody’s vision Abbey Orchard Estate was built in 1885 and is typical of the distinctive Peabody style. The main courtyard is surrounded by 11 blocks and some 330 homes.

The courtyard public space at Abbey Orchard Estate has had differing functions since it was built. Like all early Peabody Estates the courtyard contained the communal washhouse and toilet. The flats have been adapted to contain internal bathrooms and the courtyard block subsequently removed.

Peabody completed the upgrade of all the flats in 2000 and planned the final phase of renewing the drainage and mains water

systems under the courtyard. The landscape brief for Farrer Huxley Associates (FHA) was to coordinate the services and upgrade the courtyard surfacing, the parking bays, the play and ball games areas.

In 2000, when this project began, the courtyard was simply a tarmac surface in poor repair that heavily undulated. The five large Plane trees and the leaky state of the cast iron Victorian drainage system led to earth being washed down the cracked pipes causing the localised subsidence. The courtyard had a small mesh fenced play area with a slide and swing as well as a ‘cage’ ball games area. Both these amenities were in poor repair and under used. The main function of the courtyard was to park 46 cars in resident parking bays.

FHA quickly realised that the courtyard held much more potential than the simple reorganisation of the status quo. They approached Peabody with the idea that they explore options with residents through consultation where they propose a radical change in the landscape, crucially through the entire removal of the cars.

This idea chimed with the vision of key staff in Peabody. Peabody had recently completed renewals of the landscape in two of their other estates where the work was undoubtedly a big improvement, the play provision was better and there was a lot more greenery. However, the cars were still there and the functioning of the space for residents remained unchanged. They therefore decided to allow FHA a brief to explore the wider possibilities. They also understood that the scheme was likely to require further funding and additional long term management and maintenance.

FHA was passionate about maximising the social and community role the landscape could offer. It became obvious that the courtyard was widely undervalued by residents. People simply could not remember when cars had not been there. They could not envisage what the courtyard could do for

them and what benefit it could have on their lives.

FHA therefore ran extensive consultation workshops that were aimed at inspiring the residents with transformational ideas that were all deliverable within the estate. This approach ignited interest from residents and won their support in favour of real change. All ideas sought to re-engage the relationship between people, nature, and each other.

## Key Design Principles



### Feeling safe

The need for the residents to feel that the courtyard was safe and a place that they could enjoy freely was fundamental. FHA recognise that space that does not invite or encourage use becomes a source for anxiety and insecurity. Through design it was possible to create a place that was safe without any restriction of movement to any area.

FHA reinforced the sense of movement from the street into a private courtyard by positioning a large in-situ sculptural sign and screen wall (doubling as the rear of the bin store) providing a privacy screen and making obvious that this was a place for residents only, without the need for a locked gate. The play area was positioned so as not to be seen from the street and therefore not to entice children passing by. The lighting scheme contrasts strongly with the street lighting giving the effect at night that you are moving from one distinct place into another. The lighting in conjunction with contrasting paving also provides legible routes that are easy to follow between the street and the block entrances. These design moves combined with the good natural surveillance of the courtyard by many of the flats fulfilled the security needs without any recourse to introducing CCTV, making reductions in planting, removing seats, or putting up fencing.

### Cars

During the consultation process Peabody and FHA agreed to explore schemes that would require the total removal of all cars. This single idea would contribute significantly to a sea change of use in the courtyard. The space would move from one where space was limited and nearly entirely defined by the needs of parking and moving cars to one which was safe for everyone including children on their own to use with space to deliver high quality amenities.

Strikingly, less than 15% of the residents owned cars, highlighting a disproportionate bias towards a significant minority. It was simply not an equitable use of the communal space. Peabody agreed that if 70% of residents were in favour of having a car free landscape all the car parking would be removed. This was satisfactorily achieved. Vociferous complaints were made. Peabody stood by their decision backing the majority of residents and the idea that housing open space is for all the residents not simply to park cars. Moreover they wished to encourage sustainable urban living where the car has no place in housing open space in the centre of a world city with abundant public transport.



### **A Place to Meet**

To reignite the relationship between the residents and public space FHA needed to ensure the space became part of the resident's everyday life. We developed a place that enticed people in to use it, enjoy it and therefore meet and get to know each other. We designed journeys from the block entrances to the street so that the shortest route guided residents through the central landscaped space. Each of these paths intersected at different places across the landscape, providing points at which people may cross someone else's path. These triggers promote a greater awareness and familiarity that immediately diffuses fear of the unknown and begins to form a functioning community.



### **Recycling and Waste Management**

FHA completely reappraised the role of waste management on Abbey Orchard. The increasing importance of sorting and recycling waste, along with increasing quantities of packaging had made the use of communal 'Palladin' bins and narrow chutes, obsolete. The consultation revealed that the chutes were regularly blocked and unusable. Peabody had responded by providing 'Eurobins' in the open space convenient for residents to deposit larger bags.

Car parking and waste disposal had become the sole function of the courtyard. We therefore took the opportunity to turn this into a design positive and created an attractive bin chamber that would provide a store big enough to house Eurobins, and recycling bins, to cater for 100% recycling for the whole estate.

The new store is purposely positioned as a centerpiece of the courtyard, thus making a bold statement that it formed a positive, integrated part of the landscape. Residents must enter the central courtyard space to deposit rubbish. We designed a robust, attractive building, open topped and well ventilated with a bright orange glazed brick front wall. We wanted the experience of depositing waste to be transformed from a negative to a positive one, encouraging responsible recycling and waste disposal as well as creating a moment where residents could meet and socialise.



### **A Playable landscape**

With the removal of cars the whole courtyard was to be the domain for play, exploration and discovery by children. They can learn to ride their bikes on the access roads, they can play hide and seek around the hedges, they can immerse themselves in the planting beds or they can climb, perch or swing from the giant fruit sculptures. This was another sea change, something the last generation of residents could not do.

We designed a small play zone with equipment for all ages to allow the active swinging, sliding and climbing aspects of play to be catered for. We were careful to ensure this was in keeping with and contributed to the whole courtyard. The soft surfacing, was therefore mixed to match the surrounding paths and stock brick of the building ensuring integration with the wider scheme. This also marked an expression of the fact that the play zone was a part of the whole landscape and children should not need to identify with only one area of the space. We did not specify a fence to the play zone, again to ensure this area was a fully integrated part of the whole.



### **Planting**

Listening to residents express their delight and enjoyment of the scheme since its completion, the planting has been the most important factor in improving their enjoyment of the space and indeed their quality of life. Many have commented on the unexpected joy of nature coming back, bird song, colours and seasonal change. There is a strong sense of increased well-being and reduced anxiety coming from the softer greener aspects of the scheme.

Areas of planting have been provided for ground floor flat windows, create hedges, more intimate areas of seating, zones for play and exploration as well as borders for colour and climbers to soften hard materials. Wisteria now grows on the roof of the bin chamber and is just one more hint of the calm and order now found within Abbey Orchard.

The extensive planting has dramatically increased bio diversity and considerably raised resident awareness of nature and its importance.



### **A Place to View**

We recognised that a major benefit for many residents would be the attractive view of a garden from the window. We wanted to ensure the courtyard would be legible from above and have points of interest for surveillance and contemplation. Our hope was that this would be the precursor for people feeling they could then go down into the garden and enjoy it. The picture we aimed to paint for window viewing was aesthetic for contemplation and active for enjoyment. The contemporary intersecting entry of the design, the use of cruciform white paths, the lush green of the shrubs hedge and grass, seasonal colour and the sculptural fruit could invoke contemplation of the abbey, the orchard, the seasons and spirituality; the enjoyment was to watch children play.



### **Art – Fruit sculptures**

To reinforce the sense of place and ownership by residents FHA worked closely with Sarah Staton (Artist) to develop large traditional English fruit to sit in the courtyard. The fruit were positioned as if fruit fall from the Plane trees on the site. Sarah designed and delivered the fruit with involvement of estate residents and children in a series of workshops.



## **Design Aesthetic**

The main motivation behind the design was the reigniting of the relationship between people, nature and each other. The aesthetic is contemporary providing a strong counterpoint to emphasise the beauty of the decorative elegant stock brick facades of the surrounding 19c. blocks.

A white concrete curtilage skirt wall was positioned around the entire square. This wall is broken at each entrance by smaller concrete cheeks emphasising the entrances into the square and performing the role of formers for the cutting of the hornbeam hedge. The skirt retaining wall allows the central square to be level and the access road all around to accommodate the significant changes in level as well as the renewed drainage and water main systems.

The white concrete and light coloured straight cruciform paths running through the square provide the first reference to the proximity of Westminster Abbey and the sense of place of this ancient Orchard.

# *Sustainability*

Demonstrating the environmental, social and economic benefits

## **Social**

The courtyard has profoundly changed the quality of all the resident's lives. Children can play safely, the elderly can meet without anxiety in an accessible and attractive garden and everyone can recycle and undertake the necessary journeys each day between their home and the street in an environment that through familiarity with their neighbours once again belongs to them.

## **Economic**

The desirability of the flats has always been high. But the courtyard they all share enhances the sustainability of the community and therefore increases the life of the neighbourhood and its buildings.

## **Environmental**

The increased access to nature through the variety of planting and the return of wildlife is now a significant area of enjoyment for all but especially elderly residents. Don James in Block A has won the 'Westminster in Bloom' resident competition having created a flower garden of pots and troughs inspired by the planting in the courtyard and taking advantage of the beds provided.

## *Being an exemplar*

How the implementation of the policy or project has set an example of good practice for others to follow.

Since Peabody's early high density urban housing estates the provision of social housing in estates can be found in all cities and towns across Europe and beyond. This now represents a high proportion of the housing for the entire population. This year (2010) marks the first year when more than 50% of the world's people live in urban areas rather than the countryside. The need to engage the relationship between people and nature has never been higher. The sustainability of earth will only come about when all people understand and care about the natural world. This will be dramatically improved if people have a fundamental affiliation with nature that has been developed through their own early experiences near where they live.

The space where this relationship needs to be rekindled is outside every home in all our cities across Europe. They are grossly undervalued and therefore misunderstood and subject to long term under investment.

Abbey Orchard Estate main courtyard is a project that addresses all the key issues in reigniting this relationship through the changing of a typical under used, run down, undervalued space. This has been achieved through a shared ideology across the design and client team, a commitment to change, high quality design thinking and a proportionate amount of investment.

The success of this scheme has highlighted the benefit of landscape in addressing community, security, health and well being, quality of life and play needs.

The resulting scheme has challenged norms and current lack of investment in

existing housing open spaces. It highlights the benefits of this work and the change landscape can make. It provides a beacon for others to follow. It shows removal of cars and the introduction of safe places to socialise, which reintroduce nature and play near where we live works well and is worth doing, moreover this message urgently needs to be made if the fragility of the landscapes of the world are to be successfully addressed.

Abbey Orchard Estate courtyard provides the precedent for addressing the most important and undervalued housing landscapes we have.

## Innovation

Firstly it is the only scheme we are aware of where rented car parking bays have all been removed and not replaced. It shows that not only the removal of unused bays is okay but makes a positive case for the active reduction of car parking provision on estates to allow space to once again contribute to where people live and the need to deliver sustainable inner cities.

Secondly FHA designed and integrated the new bin chamber into the landscape creating an active function where people increasingly meet. The chamber is high quality and central to the scheme and is the first to recognise the new elevated status of waste management and especially recycling where the flexible solution delivers the capacity for 100% recycling on the estate.

Thirdly the play area in the middle of the square is unfenced and uses a rubber EPDM safer surfacing which rather than contrasting with the surrounding paving has been designed to match. This way we have introduced the idea that children are allowed everywhere in our playable landscape of fruit sculpture, low robust walls and planting and not restricted to a bright coloured designated zone. This is one of the very first schemes to introduce the idea of payable landscapes rather than designated play space.

## *Public participation and community engagement*

How the project has involved the active participation of the public, local and regional authorities and other players.

### Design Ideology

Peabody have consulted extensively with residents, other housing providers, and government departments over many years. This and their own experience of delivery of new housing landscapes prior to this project all contributed to the vision and confidence in committing to the fundamental changes made at Abbey Orchard Estate.

FHA have a track record of contributing to the debate on landscape and housing in the UK. This work has been founded on the practices extensive consultation undertaken in all its projects.

### Removal of Car Parking

We developed a questionnaire which was circulated to all residents. We supported the process with an open event on the estate so that residents could ask questions and raise concerns.

The questionnaire results were collated and the 70% threshold was exceeded. Peabody duly gave notice for car permits to be withdrawn once the work commenced.

This represents the most remarkable part of the work. We know of no other place where legitimately let bays have been removed by any other RSL or Council for landscaping purposes. The reduction of parking was also agreed with the Planning Authority.

A key factor in this work was not only the

excellent local public transport infrastructure that exists in central London but also an affirmation from the landlord that the landscape spaces in housing estates has a positive contribution to make to people's lives.

The landscape alone was successful in bringing about radical change for the residents of Abbey Orchard Estate and has helped transform the landscape into an area where a thriving and sustainable community now functions.

The residents have subsequently entered the space into the Westminster in Bloom (2007) competition, winning second prize. Don James, a resident who has lived through the transformation also grows a range of plants on the site and testifies to the dramatic change it has made to his quality of life.

## *Awareness- raising*

How the project has increased awareness within local government, communities and the private sector of the public and community value of landscape.

Abbey is a groundbreaking solution to a typical and everyday problem. The scheme has been recognised as such by Peabody. Since the main courtyard works have been completed they have commissioned a phase two for the two smaller courtyards at Abbey Orchard Estate which are now complete and a further estate refurbishment all enshrining the same principles learnt at Abbey Orchard Estate main courtyard.

Investment in housing landscapes does not qualify for central government funding under any housing

grant programme. This is a particularly glaring omission in the Decent Homes funding program (£9bn). The government's sustainability flagship.

Peabody have recognised through Abbey Orchard Estate and their other environmental initiatives just how important the landscape is. Three years after Abbey Orchard was completed they have now launched their IMPROVE programme worth (£50m) across their estates to deliver change to open space.

Peabody themselves are highly regarded by the housing sector as leaders in new thinking and innovation. The whole sector and perhaps the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) will look at Abbey Orchard Estate and their IMPROVE programme.

Abbey Orchard Estate can be hugely influential in bringing about a greater awareness of the benefit and importance of 'retro fit' landscapes in housing. It is only 400 yds from the Parliament of one of Europe's premier cities and closer to the HCA offices. MPs and HCA representatives have been and can use it as a convenient resource for guests. I am aware of a number of delegations who have also seen it including one from Wales. This award will further publicise this typical yet compelling scheme

for the wider promotion of landscape and its role in our lives.

Within the field of Landscape Architecture Abbey Orchard Estate is a featured case study in the new position Statement 'Making it Home' the role of landscape in housing issued by the Landscape Institute in 2010.