



Castle Vale

location:
Birmingham

Castle Vale is a large scale, resident-led regeneration project which over 15 years has transformed the fortunes of a once notorious estate. Throughout this process the Castle Vale Housing Action Trust (CVHAT) demonstrated a willingness to embrace the latest thinking in housing design and layout, public buildings and public space.



Introduction

Built in the mid-1960's, on what was once the Castle Bromwich Airfield, Castle Vale is one of the largest post-war housing estates in the Midlands. The estate became home to families from run-down areas of inner-city Birmingham, whose homes had been declared unfit to live in as part of the 1960s clearance programmes. Originally Castle Vale comprised a mixture of houses, maisonette blocks and 34 high rise towers. Approximately one third of the estate was built for sale.

The social environment and living conditions deteriorated rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s and, in Birmingham, the name 'Castle Vale' came to be associated with social exclusion, unemployment and crime. In 1993 a Housing Action Trust was established for Castle Vale supported by a group of strong and committed tenants and residents. This enabled the tenanted homes to be transferred out of local authority control, and a massive regeneration programme to commence.

Over the next twelve years 2200 homes were demolished and a further 1333 were improved. 1500 new homes were built, along with a shopping centre, community facilities and health centres. The physical environment was improved and landscaped and a new park was created on the site of some of the old tower blocks. Economic regeneration activities included the creation of new jobs. Health and life expectancy improved.

Castle Vale is on the north east edge of Birmingham, north of the M6 motorway close to junction 5.

As the regeneration of the estate has taken place over 15 years, there is a lot to see including a doctor's surgery and a healthy living centre, two shopping centres, an enterprise park, a public park, refurbishment of tower blocks and several phases of new housing which has created distinctive zones with different styles of layout and build. Design highlights are listed below. The life of the CVHAT ended in 2005 and its work is now continued by the Castle Vale Community Housing Association and the Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership.

Design process

The process of regenerating Castle Vale has been led by the CV HAT. From the start in 1993 the process has been complex and highly political with a degree of opposition to the Trust both inside and outside the estate. There was a sometimes painful process of planning for change, haggling for funding from the Government, establishing the CVHAT team and setting up representative structures within the estate.



Castle Vale's original masterplan was devised by Hunt Thompson Associates. Over a period of 15 months, from June 1994 every corner of the estate was assessed. Which areas were intimidating? What was lacking? Why were some features more popular than others?

As well as residents, Hunt Thompson Associates sought input from local businesses, voluntary and statutory agencies, and representatives of Birmingham City Council. The result was published in the autumn of 1995, shortly before the Trust's lifetime funding was agreed. The vision was to re-create Castle Vale as: "A self-sustaining community living in high quality homes in a pleasant and safe environment." At the end of the process "Castle Vale residents would enjoy an improved quality of life and economic opportunity. They would also have been empowered to make choices regarding ownership and management of their homes." This was to be achieved within a decade. Alongside details of demolition, the masterplan included information about buildings to be refurbished. But it did not include details of the schedule.

The 15-month consultation process had revealed that residents wanted fewer alleyways between buildings and improved road safety including making the straight roads less appealing to joy riders and speeding motorists. There was also support for well maintained open green spaces, and improved transport links.

The first phase of the demolition began in 1995 with the clearance of the 'Centre 8' blocks. Four more followed soon after. By 2000, all 27 maisonette blocks had been cleared, as had the fourteen Farnborough Road tower blocks. Also in 2000, Sainsbury's and the new shopping centre opened. 2001 also saw the demolition of the estate's 114 one-bedroom bungalows which were replaced by newly constructed two-bedroom bungalows. By 2002, only six tower blocks remained on Castle Vale. In 2003, four of these blocks were demolished, leaving just two high-rise blocks standing. The Housing Action Trust refurbished the two remaining tower blocks which had been built on top of schools.

Evaluation

Castle Vale is interesting in design terms because of the commitment to good design demonstrated by the HAT.

A good starting point for any visit is the Centre Park designed by Birmingham City Council's Landscape Practice Group. The park completed in 2003 occupies an area of 2.36 acres in the former 'Centre 8' site (an area where tower blocks were demolished). The park includes two children's play areas, a Multi-use Games Area, formal bedding areas for traditional spring and summer planting and herbaceous plants, and a

conservation area. The introduction of a Park Keeper has meant that local people feel safe whether they want to sit and enjoy the flowers, to bring their children to the playground, or to take part in one of the many sporting activities in the games area.

The park was awarded the Civic Trust's prestigious Green Flag award for 2006. Note the decision to fence the park to differentiate it from the other open green spaces on the estate and the clear entrances signalled by gateway designs based on the Spitfire motif.

Either side of Centre Park are the homes that replace the 'Centre 8' cluster of tower blocks with 350 low-rise housing units and sheltered accommodation for 60 residents. The homes were designed by Hunt Thompson Associates and built by Sanctuary and Focus Housing Associations between 1996 and 1998. In recognition of their high levels of safety and security they have been awarded Secured by Design status by the police. The development was also one of the first in the UK to incorporate Home Zone principles, where pedestrians have priority in shared surface roadways.

From Centre Park one can walk east to Reed Square, the HAT's last major physical development, begun in 2003 (masterplanning by Gillespies and Associated Architects). In its original format the estate's subsidiary shopping and amenity centre included poor quality retail outlets, a community hall, and library. All were unattractive and under-used. The Trust had to find ways of making it attractive to the market and the first step was for the HAT to commit money to the site, showing that it meant business. Stage two was to approach service providers and say, 'we'll give you the site free if you agree to move there. The police force was the first to take up the offer, a decision that soothed concerns about safety and paved the way for others to follow suit – Somerfields supermarket is the anchor store for the new Reed Square. This mixed use development also includes office space, housing for sale, a new vicarage for nearby St Cuthberts, and a range of small neighbourhood shops. The masterplan for this area attempts to create the enclosure of a small high street, how this sits within the very open environment of the rest of the estate is a question for debate.

The highlight of the Reed Square development is C3, the Castle Vale Community Campus (Associated Architects) opened in 2006. C3 includes adult learning facilities, a library, office space, and meeting rooms for community groups. C3 is a very simple but exciting example of community architecture, with a single prominent entrance through a double height glazed skin that wraps around the lower floors of the building. This gives a transparent quality to the building that compliments the welcoming and supportive environment that the building provides to the community.

From Reed Square or Centre Park one can walk south through a part of the original estate which has been retained (between Tangmere Drive and Farnborough Road) albeit with some tower blocks removed and some in-fill development. This area was designed in a classic 'Radburn' layout with houses fronting onto pedestrian only paths and backing on to vehicular access roads.

South of Farnborough Road is the HAT's last major residential development completed in 2004. This consists of 237 new flats, houses and bungalows laid out according to a masterplan designed by Walker Troup Architects. The accommodation is largely social housing with just over 10% of the properties sold on the private market. The original architecture, public art, diverse housing types and detailing of the buildings has resulted in a scheme with a distinctive character and a strong sense of place. The use of strong colours and differing scale at gateways and corner points makes the development easy to

navigate. A well defined structure of perimeter blocks creates successful, safe, overlooked streets whilst providing private space to the rear. The development incorporates rainwater harvesting, solar heating and photovoltaic panels.

It is significant that Walker Troup responded a development brief for the site which was established as part of the original masterplanning in 1995. This, for example, required that the majority of flats would be accommodated along the Farnborough Road, to create a strong street frontage and urban scale, with a more suburban character in the streets behind. Another aspect of good practice is that the Housing Action Trust paid for Walker Troup to be retained in a design guidance role to steer and audit the work of developers Lovell.

Key design features to look out for

- Centre Park – good example of a new medium-scale neighbourhood park
- C3 – stunning new library and community campus.
- Farnborough Road development – colourful and highly legible residential development with a strong identity.
- Centre 8 replacement homes – to the west and east of Centre Park; an early development of incorporating secure by design and home zone principles.
- Self-build – somewhat ‘walled-off’ to the south west of the Farnborough Road development are 14 homes with mock-Tudor features constructed as a self-build scheme.
- Re-inventing the home. Along Cadbury Drive are 28 family houses built by Mercian Housing Association to adapt to their occupants changing requirements.
- The Sanctuary, towards the west end of Tangmere drive is a community building designed by TSP Architects and completed in 1999 which provides a meeting and activity space and home for a dozen voluntary and community organisations.

Link and downloads

- <http://www.cvcha.org.uk/index.htm> (Castle Vale Community Housing Association – successor landlord to the Housing Action Trust).
- <http://www.cvnp.org.uk/> (Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership).
- <http://www.cvcet.org.uk/> (Castle Vale Community Environmental Trust)
- <http://www.cvhat.org.uk/index.html> (now static website of the Housing Action Trust)
- <http://www.designinglibraries.org.uk/view/index.php?id=4412dbcd39383> (information on the design of the C3 library and community campus)
- Site map
- CABE West Midlands and South West housing audit (includes case study of Farnborough Road).
- No longer notorious – the revival of Castle Vale – booklet obtainable as pdf through CVNP

Contact for further information

Ian Bingham
Castle Vale Community Housing Association
11 High Street
Castle Vale
Birmingham
B35 7PR
0121 748 8114