



**HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION**  
RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

# **Home Renaissance Foundation**

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Home in the City

By Piers Gough  
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## Home in the City

By Piers Gough<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I am going to drill down and make some quite narrow points about the physical relationship between the home and the city. Architects can talk about all kinds of things, but in the end, we are about organising physical relationships between things.

It is true that the home has got horribly smaller in the last building boom. The reasons are to do with land values, developers and the planning system. The planning system eschewed standards for homes. There is no rule about how big or small a house or a room in a house can be and that has led to a race to the bottom by developers. They had to do it to get land, because when they pay for land, the more rooms they can get on the land the more they can pay the land owner. The land owner does not care about anything except getting the maximum value. Developers, therefore, were trying to make the developments as small as possible in order to be the ones that succeed in buying the land. That is what has forced them into this unpalatable situation. It is actually a very narrow market because in this country most people do not want to buy a brand new home. Homes are produced so slowly that the chances of you being a buyer of a new home are extremely remote. Most people, ninety-something percent of people, buy an old home. All this issue about bigger or smaller flats is a consumer issue, but only a consumer issue of an unbelievably narrow band of consumers. The only other people who receive modern homes are affordable homes that are built under the auspices of what used to be the housing corporation. They can set standards and do set standards. The standards are not fantastic, but they do set standards.

I would just like to make a brief aside. Architects have had this weird thing in recent years of designing apartments for affordable and market together because developers have to provide both types of housing. Interestingly, the affordable housing is bigger and better than what they are going to sell on the market. It is quite an inversion. Architects were pleading with developers, 'please, let us design these two sorts of flats the same so that the flats and the social housing are indistinguishable.' We thought we were asking them to make the affordable better as it were, but it ended up the other way around! We ended up thinking the market flats were terrible in comparison with the affordable ones.

What I would like to discuss here is master-planning in the city, that is, what the interface between the home and the city is. We won a competition to do a master-plan in the Gorbals area of Glasgow in 1989, which was not only, shockingly, 20 years ago, but also ten years before Richard Rogers put pen to paper and told us this was all a good idea. Glasgow thought it was a good idea a bit before that and, what is more, they had driving forces in the city, perhaps a little bit like Bilbao, insofar as various senior people in the city decided to do this project and to get on with it. The Gorbals had been a magnificent part of the city. It is just to the South of the River Clyde and across from the city centre. It had always been a residential zone of the city, but what is interesting about it, despite having always been a working class residential zone, is that it was absolutely grand. The one thing you can say about this image – one can regret the loss of trams and the fact that people cannot stand in the street without getting run over these days – is that although these people were

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poor, and Victorian poor were poorer than our poor, they did inhabit these substantial, almost palace-like façades with phenomenal baroque chimneys in an extraordinary location.

On the other hand, the layout of the Gorbals was ruthless. There are a lot of North-South streets leading you to your work, which was on the Clyde. There were fairly narrow back courts between housing which were mostly used for ashes and rubbish rather than for play. This grid, however, is cut across by one old medieval road that ran across the Gorbals and still does. There was a significant transformation of the area in the sixties. These buildings in the Gorbals, which I think we would now try to preserve and rebuild because they were fine stone-built tenement buildings, lacked sanitation, amenities, and were very run down at the time. The built fabric, however, was in the right place. There were relationships between people on either side of a street and a strong sense of community. Patently, at that time the street was an excellent place for the family because you could allow very young children to play on the street without fear, particularly without fear of traffic. Glasgow is one of the lowest car-owning cities in Britain, but it does not mean there are not an awful lot of cars.

What happened next was that in the sixties, to improve sanitation, we built a lot of experimental and interesting buildings, particularly tower blocks, which were built by firms that had systems of building them very quickly. During that period, 10,000 homes were built in Glasgow a year. They were going like a train to re-house people in these high-rise buildings that were very cutting edge at the time, designed by Basil Spence. They look rather like the Barbican flats and were opened by the Queen. What this kind of urban townscape threw up, however, was a desolate place. Nobody can say that there was not a lot of place to play. Children could theoretically play in a lot of open space, but you would not want them to. Parents had no appetite to allow children to play in a place where there not only might be traffic, but somebody might decide to drive a motorbike over a green space. These buildings were extremely badly built. They were not very good socially, but happily their promise of physical wellbeing turned out to be a bit of a chimera. Many of them were extremely inadequate, a lot of the time physically inadequate, and unpleasant places to live. They were all pretty much demolished.

When we entered the competition in 1989, there were a couple of tower blocks left that were fiercely enjoyed by the owners. The only social activity was offered by a strange bungalow-pub. They were four-storey buildings originally, but they knocked down the whole building except for the pub. Our plan, which was neither reactionary nor the cutting edge of modernism at the time, picked up various ideas about the planning of a city. We retained Cran Street where it historically had been and proposed to build shops on it so that it would become a shopping street again. We put streets across it. Instead of hundreds of North-South streets, we proposed large East-West streets because the existing streets of the area completely failed to join up with the other streets of the area.

The railway cut off one part of the Gorbals from the other. We wanted to link them back together physically, so we made all our streets join all the other streets, hence the funny geometry. What this plan shows are very wide streets. Our idea was that if the rich can live in wide streets, poorer people in society should be able to do so as well. Why can they not be in the grandest streets? We found one beautiful building on the site, the ruins of a Greek Thomson church, but it was still great and we made it our main public space. We made it into a park with the church as an

icon of a public space. We exploited what was there and then tried to mend the community with our street pattern running across. We had a theory about the inversion of the city's street hierarchy. In the Victorian era there was a huge hierarchy in society with very clear distinctions between the rich and the poor. The rich lived in wide, big boulevards in rich mansions while the poor lived on the narrowest of narrow streets and were the servants of the rich. We thought it would be interesting to try and invert that hierarchy and put ordinary people onto the widest streets and in housing that was as glamorous as possible. We also thought we would reverse streets so that the traffic that normally dictated big streets would be squeezed down to the narrowest streets. The shopping street, then, would be an intermediate street. We never quite achieved all of that, but what we did propose and was taken up was the hugely widened street as a kind of grand gesture in the city. The good thing about a wide street is that you can put the trees in the middle of the street and it does not overshadow the windows too much. That is quite an issue in Glasgow because the light is not so great that far North. You do not really want to put trees on the street right in front of your windows because you need the light. It also gives the opportunity to park the inordinate number of cars. 100% parking was being requested of us. In other words, we were being asked to provide a parking space for each flat or maisonette. It was a phenomenal problem to persuade the highway authority to let us park cars in the street. I might be a bit primitive on these things, but I think the best place for cars is on the street. That is where they are, that is their life, that is where they enjoy being and that is where cars want to be. To put them in other places seems to me to always be artificial, as well as very expensive, and may ruin other environments.

The most important idea concerning the redevelopment of the Gorbals was bringing families back to the centre of the city. Families were moving to the suburbs like there was no tomorrow. They were immigrating to the suburbs and leaving the city for the poor, the old and the students. It was really important to bring families back to the city – apart from anything because the local authority had built a lot of schools that were not being used since nobody with children lived around them. We had to bring children and families back. Our big idea was so simple it is almost ridiculous. In our plan the two lower floors of the four storey building are maisonettes where families live. They have two floors to live on and a fairly ordinary design: living rooms downstairs and bedrooms upstairs. We did this because bedrooms on an urban street in this sort of location are rather vulnerable. You do not want to put your children behind the very window the burglar is going to come through if he breaks in. Our idea was for people to sleep on the first floor and have a ground floor living area that spills out at the back into a private garden. That is what a house is: a front door, a back door, a private garden etc. The only thing here is that you have a couple of floors of flats above you. There is a tiny harm because they can look out their back window and look into your garden, but it is a small price to pay for the fact that you have got hundreds of people living in your neighbourhood. This means that because of the population size, the shops will survive and doctors and all the necessary facilities will be within easy reach because there is a decent sized population. Too many people who think they want a house overlook the fact that houses just spread the population out to a degree that you have to be mummy taxi driver because the distance between the facilities you need is too great. Houses take up too much space.

The great thing about proposing something in Glasgow was that the culture was already towards tenement blocks. The European model of the urban block, which is not done so much in England but is done very much in Scotland, was a model that already worked for people. They were

expecting a lot of their housing to be like this. Despite thinking, in their hearts, that it would be nicer to have a separate detached house of their own, they were prepared to see that this had most of the attributes of that house. The idea, however, could not be less new. We just went to Maida Vale in London and saw how to do it. The interesting thing about Maida Vale, and the reason why it is particularly good, is that it was an immigrant location in London, made up particularly of dispossessed Jews. Once they had survived living in the East End for a bit, which perhaps was not to their best taste, they moved to West London and built these magnificent mansion blocks and left their cars in the streets. Well, they would have done had they arrived after the car! In any case, they left streets wide enough to leave cars out on them.

Our other big idea is that at the back of the tenement blocks and beyond the private gardens in every single case we proposed a shared garden. This garden was to be shared between the people living in the block. Because we are nice, liberal, socialised people, architects think there can be something called semi-public/semi-private space. This means that there is a tacit understanding that an area is for the local residents, not just for anybody. This is not only wrong, but a bad idea. The whole way in which our shared space works is because no one else can go in it. The only reason you can let a three year old out into the communal area and run around away from parental overlooking – it is unbelievably necessary for children to have some life that is not completely supervised – is to have a space that you, as the parent, are totally certain is safe. You know everybody around your square. You know their predilections and you are able to control everything through a committee of people. If you live there you can control that square and make rules about how to live there. You can decide whether dogs can be walked, whether you can light a bonfire or have a barbeque, whether you can play football etc. These are all things that should be left to the residents to decide. Our idea was that this space made living in the centre of the city bearable. It might be that the most desirable thing would be to have a farm at the back. If I were a local resident I might vote for a farm so that we could have some eggs and my children would get to play with animals. There are all sorts of things you might put in the back that might make it more desirable than a piece of flat lawn that you might or might not kick around on.

As a kind of model of urban living, you have got a hard side to your life, which is the city. The city is tough. It has got all the gorgeous things that you want, the cinemas, the theatres, the zoos, the fun, the play, all sorts of things you can go to, the doctors, the shops, the works, but it is quite harsh. The concomitant of that is that, on top of traffic and all the other difficulties, you have other people around you who may be slightly threatening and might be all sorts of things. What you do want in the city is an oasis. You want an oasis of calm where you feel safe and that is yours even though you have to share it with a few people. It is essentially yours, though. It is the hard side/soft side of the city that I think makes city living bearable.

I am afraid to admit, yet again, that in 1989 this bright, new idea was not a bright, new idea at all. It is also in Maida Vale where people in the know in London live. They have these back gardens that are impermeable to other people. They are entirely private and you have to subscribe a little money every year for the maintenance and upkeep of your garden. The thing is, these flats are so popular you cannot actually buy one. Even now, during the recession, it is difficult to get one. They are unbelievably popular. Not all of them, funnily enough, are private. There are some council dwellings in Maida Vale that are predicated on that idea. They do take up a bit of space and of

course with land-hungry developers you are not always going to get this. Luckily, Glasgow was cheap enough at the time, zero value in fact, so that we could propose ideas like this and they were not chewed up in the economic horrors. What is interesting is that as the Gorbals went on, developers had to have the infrastructure put into them at the beginning, but by the end they were paying good money for the land and it was working economically as well.

It took ten years to build the master plan out. It was going incredibly slowly until Tom McCartney became the director of the development and organised the developers. He was fierce about the rules of development. He was not interested in any other variations of this master plan. This was the master plan by the great Piers Gough! He stuck by his masterplan and did not say, 'well, we will develop it over time. We will think about it. Perhaps it will be irrelevant ten years after it was first designed.' It is so simple and the ideas are so straightforward. The ideas are all about hard side/soft side in city living that you can push them forward and insist that they are adhered to. Indeed, during Tom McCartney's time, the whole development was extended to the East and all these ideas ran on over into another whole section of the Gorbals. By that time they invented lifts and you could go higher. Some developers did not quite understand the idea of the private/shared spaces and used them as the tip for the site.

We built the public square, predicated on the great church, which has shared play areas and the opportunity to meet people from outside your block. The back areas were quite successfully green but they had to overcome one huge snag in Glasgow, that is that they are much more decorous about emptying their bins than we are down South. I had not realised that and it is interesting how a tiny thing like that can make a huge difference. In Glasgow, the bin men always go into the back court to get the bins. To get them out of that way of thinking was one of the tiny little Achilles' heels of this. In the early phases there were gates and the bin men could go into that shared back court, which was fairly innocent – unless they left the gate open! In that case it really just does not work properly.

Many different architects built many different things in many different styles. Some very good architects worked on this and there was quite an extensive use of local stone. The library, which is a new library, is the most used library in the Gorbals. As mentioned earlier, that will not put Glasgow on the map, but it certainly will make the Gorbals a nice place to live. The place has built-in qualities. Of course, if you photograph it in December, you will find snow and frost on the ground and not an awful lot of people about. The tell-tale bins, however, are out. The space is quite large and rather useable. People have their private gardens running down to the space into which bin stalls and other little structures are built. It is all rather informal at the back. There is a formal playground because you probably do not want to put play equipment into the back of every part. You can have shared play predicated on this beautiful church in a lovely public space. Having shared space does not mean you do not have public green space, it just means you have your own, as it were, back yard. Some of these back yards are absolutely full of structures, which I am sure the children of that area adore. It might not be so green, but there are great possibilities of play and they love running around there. There is also a great sense of communal back area which is allowed to be a concomitant to the hard edge of business-like areas of the city that are in the front of the building. Some of the layouts of these gardens are not to my taste because I find them too contrived and I think they prevent rather than encourage children from playing, but the idea is there.

On a faintly academic note, it is quite interesting to see the six plans of Glasgow. The very first grid plan has a phenomenal typography, but is an absolutely rigid plan. It is as if it said, 'we are human beings. We have mastered landscape. We know what to do, we are ordered, sensible people. We build grids.' The odd old road is allowed to creep in Govanhill Street and parks and back courts. Then you get to Park Crescent and a celebration comes into it. We can celebrate a bit more, be a bit more extravagant and baroque in our planning. We can have crescents and glamorous things in the city. By the time you get to Down Hill things are loosening up a bit. You have got back courts with alleyways in them, gardens and shapes that are not quite orthogonal. In the sixties we did not even develop this plan, we just jumped to this absolutely nebulous plan area where there was an awful lot of space, but nobody knew whose it was. It was neither front nor back. It is everywhere and anywhere. It just continues and slops about like sewage about the city. It is all fairly unusable.

We did not get to build in our first phase because none of the developers chose to work with us – maybe because we were in London and not in Glasgow. Tom McCartney arranged it so that we got to do one of the blocks in the final episode of this scheme. You can see the insane number of cars you have to put into a scheme. Because they can walk anywhere from here, the cars are only driven at the weekends and since the streets are so full of cars, there is not much playing out on them. If the area were richer people would park their cars under the building, but, unfortunately, the area is not rich enough for that. It does show our concept, which is simply an enclosed garden with the red being family housing and the blue being the other flats above it. The site was a bit tight so our shared area was not huge, but it still exists.

We made the houses wiggle on our particular project to establish the difference between the houses at the bottom and the flats at the top and give them an extra glamour factor. These are pure houses because in the South and in Glasgow you need all the sun you can get. We, therefore, built these low and did not build on top of them. We did, however, build them higher on top of the North, East and West side so that there are eight storeys in those buildings. That is because these flats were getting so valuable they could pay for the lift you need if you go up that high. Thankfully, the scheme allowed for large balconies and, funnily enough, families do live up there. Architects noticed from buying off plan that these were fantastically wonderful flats and bought them like hotcakes. This scheme, then, is quite peopled with architects, some of whom have families. In the image below you can see the houses at the bottom. Obviously, they have their own front doors. You can see the houses there and the upper parts and lots of very large balconies which might remind you of the Basil Spence blocks and their great, huge balconies at the end. I just emulated them, but I did not tell anybody because they hated those blocks! You do get houses on three floors. I think there were fourteen houses and four of them had kitchens on the top floor, four of them had kitchens on the middle floor and four of them had kitchens on the bottom. The top floor ones sold first. You can also see the tiny bit of protective realm at the front. You have your own front door, gardens and shared gardens at the back.

We designed the scheme in 1989 and then Richard Rogers wrote his paper in 1999. You might think this is what it is all about: very pleasant places, big balconies and housing at high densities. Just recently a scheme of housing, *Accordia*, won the Stirling Prize, the biggest architecture award in Britain. The scheme, it must be said, is in the most salubrious suburb of Cambridge with

house prices beyond imagination. It does have some of the principles I have been discussing, although regrettably, nobody has picked up on the shared back garden. They tend to have play spaces that are not shared at the back and are definitely not private. On the other hand, cars are banished below ground or to private garages. They do not have to put up with open car parking. One of those spaces, which is for child and family play, does have a bit of a juxtaposition with the road. It is funny about roads and cars and children. If there is any chance of a car, as a parent you have to be there. It is only if there is absolutely no way there could be a car that you do not risk anything by letting them out. However, the houses are lovely and have crazy chimneys so *Accordia* is, obviously, very delicious. It had a lot of already existing trees and is very well and thoughtfully laid out. It is very family friendly and is a great community. They use all sorts of nice tricks with triple level gardens. Even in a compact city you can do a lot of interesting things with your outside space to mediate between you and the harsh realities of life. There are intermediate ideas such as these little mews streets that are effectively private because nobody is going to go down them except you and your neighbours. This is very much predicated on car park structures and hiding the cars away, which is, unfortunately, quite an expensive option.

We too have to look abroad. I went through all 93 schemes on the CABE<sup>2</sup> website to see if any of them had picked up on the Gorbals' idea of the back court garden, but none of them had. I had to look to Freiburg, in Germany. It seems that they do things so effortlessly abroad. They know how to do things. The whole place has that lovely family, soft touch around the back. The landscape architect has been told to plant things, not just to put in paving, which they like to do in Britain. I think landscape architects like to specify paving because it is their real pleasure. Plants are a bit of a nuisance. They are not reliable. Paving, however, can be picked out of a catalogue. Another example which everybody knows about and adores is *Hammarby* in Stockholm. They have got some water and it is all a bit gorgeous. Even there, in spite of being on water, which makes people think that they do not need anything else, the spaces are very much set up for family play at the back.

I would like to conclude with another intervention in the city. Parks are wonderful lungs for a city and, of course, offer a much larger play area and a much more substantial range of activities. My only lottery project was to build a bridge over Mile End Road, the six lane highway, in the East End of London, joining two ends of Mile End Park, which is a linear park that runs North-South. Due to various political weaknesses, when they meant to clear out all the buildings to make this linear park the Liberal Democrats lost heart and could not bear to ask these people to relocate. As a consequence, the park was very compromised and they started to have to move things around, which might have been to their advantage. The Catholic church was not going to move, for example, and there is a school close by as well. We sat in the school one weekend and tried to think of great things that would get lottery money for this park. By luck or serendipity the idea jumped into my head that if we joined the park across the road, it would win out over the road like stone, paper and scissors. This time, however, the park would win over the road, contrary to in the past where the road had obviously been the winner. We had this very simple idea of carrying out the park over the road and applied for lottery funding. As I was a commercial architect, I realised that we would probably have to do a bit more than that.

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<sup>2</sup> CABE is the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment

Now the park is a perfectly lovely, linear park with lots of mature and new planting. It has an ecology centre, an arts centre and all sorts of things. The bridge goes over the road and carries the park. Underneath it there are shops because we figured that if the street was not going to be demolished, it might as well be supported by shops. The picture was taken just before they opened. Apart from anything, the notion of green winning out over road in East London seemed to be a very nice psychological flip for that area. Putting shops underneath produced the most spectacular rents. We got the Lottery to pay to build it and then the park collects the rent. That rent supplies some park maintenance funds.

The bridge has a curved bottom so it does not feel too oppressive underneath it, which is one of the problems with bridges that go across things. When you go up onto the bridge from either side or from either end you come up and, remarkably because London is completely flat, this is the highest public point in the whole of Tower Hamlet. Obviously, you know you are in a road because you can hear it, but you cross in a tranquil way between planting that has been set down so you do not see the road. Next to the bridge are various delightfully laid out gardens. What you get with this is a very interesting permeation of the people of Tower Hamlet back over their environment. When you come up to the park there is something about ownership of the place where you live. It is a really interesting thing that I had not realised until I was on the bridge and a councillor said, 'I used to hate Canary Wharf and then I got on this bridge and I realised that it was just over there. It's fine. It's part of my borough and I should embrace it.' I think that is a very odd idea, but I think it is because they had always approached Canary Wharf from underneath and it had been this huge thing. When they got on top of the bridge it suddenly became manageable.

We did have public consultation for the project and it was pointed out to me that the bridge would be an ideal place for snipers to shoot at children at the Catholic school and that, therefore, it should not be built. That is what consultation does for you. Health and safety got involved and insisted we have two separate driveways: one to walk on and one for cyclists. The thing about cyclists is that they cannot be trusted so they had to have rumble strips. Wherever there was a crossing there were rumble strips in the bicycle lane. Of course, no cyclist is going to take his bicycle down a bicycle lane that has rumble strips on it when there is a perfectly good pedestrian path without rumble strips. So cyclists use the pedestrian path and pedestrians use the bicycle path. In the end, though, it all worked out.

To conclude, I would like to make a point to draw this paper together. This is what I believe we need to think about: the ideal is that outside your front door there is a twelve screen cinema so that everything you could possibly want to see is on and out the back door you have the countryside. It is probably not achievable, but you might get a farmyard at the back and a cinema at the front and that, for me, would be an ideal city.