



ON THE DRAWING BOARD

VeloCity

The team's scheme proposes a holistic and layered approach to densifying rural villages... while investing in great cycling and walking routes between them

The world of architecture is littered with competition-winning schemes that never leap off the drawing board. And for the last two years, **VeloCity**, the inspired, sustainable rural densification scheme — dreamed up by an all-female, multi-disciplinary team of architects, engineers, urban designers and planners — might have looked likely to join their number. Winner of a 2017 competition launched by the **UK government's National Infrastructure Commission** to find a more sustainable way to develop the region between **Cambridge** and **Oxford** into a viable 'knowledge' corridor, the team's scheme proposes a holistic and layered approach to densifying rural villages in manageable increments while investing in great cycling and walking routes between them, as well as to the nearest railways. By linking villages more directly, the project releases pressure on the surrounding — and inadequate — road infrastructure, decreases reliance on the car and creates resilient and healthy communities while enriching the economies of the UK's failing and demographically depleted rural communities.

The VeloCity team comprises architects **Sarah Featherstone** of **Featherstone Young** and **Annalie Riches** of **Mikhail Riches**, urbanist **Petra Marko** of **Marko and Placemakers**, strategist **Kay Hughes** of **Khaa**, planner **Jennifer Ross** of **Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design**, and engineer **Judith Sykes** of **Expedition Engineering**. Their breadth of experience and shared ambition for the

proposal has undoubtedly helped to address whatever challenges the scheme has met on its rounds, as well as garner large amounts of positive media coverage, multiple conference and seminar invitations, as well as a showcase at the recent **Oslo Architecture Triennale**. And now they have secured their first client: **Blenheim Estates**, just outside Oxford.

Most famous for **Blenheim Palace**, in total Blenheim Estates has 12,000 acres of land that stretches across several local communities, and manages farmland, woodlands and homes. VeloCity sits within a new strategy the Estates recently unveiled to address the challenges facing rural communities, to reverse environmental degradation and the increasing isolation of an often ageing population.

The partnership with VeloCity will support its aim of 'accessible connections', looking at ways to connect the villages via more strategic walking and cycling routes. The housing designs to be developed by the VeloCity team will be an antidote to the 'cottage pastiche and 20th-century suburban villas' that previously littered the countryside. 'We are aiming for passivhaus, and to create something more modern-rural, and of its time,' says Featherstone. With team member Riches' practice, Mikhail Riches, winning the 2019 **Stirling Prize** for a desirable but also hugely energy-efficient social housing scheme in **Norwich**, the moment is ripe for change.

The kinds of densities the VeloCity team will investigate are similar to a Victorian

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terrace — 100 dwellings per hectare. In Norwich, Mikhail Riches has shown how that can work within a historic city. In a village, says Featherstone: 'It's about how you place houses as well. We're keen on working with the topography to maintain heritage views and distribute housing in a sensitive way. We understand it as being a set of design codes, taking cues from cottages and farms to create a mix of housing typologies with different scales and materials, so that the buildings belong and fit with both the place and current lifestyle requirements.'

The Blenheim Estates land is outside the area addressed by VeloCity's original proposal — which was for 400,000 new homes around six existing villages near a railway station on the anticipated Oxford-Cambridge express train line. However, Featherstone says, they offer an ideal chance both to prototype the new modern-rural typologies and deprioritise car use. The new cycle and walkway strategy could happen sooner, and should, she adds, be transformational: 'If we are able to pilot a route that crisscrosses the park, it will make journeys to and from schools and shops much less disconnected.' Featherstone points out that 30% of land in the UK is owned by landed estates: 'That makes Blenheim's position crucial in the way we look to make significant change.' The bigger, long-term vision, she adds, is a 'radical approach to placemaking to achieve the paradigm shift necessary to sustain the environment'.

Words by
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