

VELOCITY MEETS VELOCITY



From left: planning consultant Jennifer Ross, strategist Kay Hughes of Kheon, architect Annalie Riches of Sterling Prize-winning Mikhail Riches, architect Sarah Featherstone, director of Featherstone Young, architect Petra Marko, cofounder of Marko & Placemakers, and engineer Judith Bykes, director of Expedition Engineering

Sister act

VeloCity – no relation – is a group of urbanists who are working hard to get walking and cycling into new communities they are seeking to build in the UK. David Taylor spoke to them

BY DAVID TAYLOR

A group of architects and designers are blazing a trail for a new kind of rural settlement that puts the bicycle at the heart of things. They are all female, and suggest that this factor gives them a kind of softer, less ego-driven approach to placemaking than the 'build new things' approach favoured by some of their male counterparts. And this group is called VeloCity. Fab name. (Ahem).

I caught up with the group's lead, Jennifer Ross from architects Tibbalds, and two of the others in the group – Sarah Featherstone of Featherstone Young and Annalie Riches of Mikhail Riches – to find out what makes them tick. And to get to grips with the approach to building new settlements they first pushed forward successfully in an ideas competition to create a new way of living in the 'Oxford Cambridge growth corridor', set up by the National Infrastructure Commission some three years ago. As an ideas competition it would be unlikely to result in a real, physical scheme, but it was awarded the William Sutton Prize 2018 for excellence in social housing design and placemaking, meaning they could pool the prize money into progressing their ideas.

As a direct result of the Ox-Cam competition, VeloCity was advised to connect with a potential suitor for

a whole different place, and once again they succeeded. The group convinced landowners at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire to let them loose on creating a new 'greener' vision for the 801ha estate around the famous John Vanburgh-designed monumental country house. This will be a new carbon-negative, 30-year strategy for managing the portfolio of residential, commercial and agricultural properties.

Speaking in semi-lockdown from Covid-19, the group agree that the time is very opportune for this kind of reappraisal of how we work and function, not least since the pandemic has shown people that they can work where they want, says Riches. Many of us yearn for some of the peace and quiet that resulted from Covid-19 lockdown measures, not to mention the cleaner air that resulted from fewer cars on the roads and fewer planes in the sky.

Many people, VeloCity say, are fleeing the city, with the Blenheim vision appearing to meet that need. The group's thinking sets up employment in nodes connected by cycleways, with 'work hubs' operating as what Ross explains are social hubs too, and villages based around people, places, sustainable transport and new technology. It's also heavily tinged



with 'deep green', with the place-based vision, they say, proposing incremental change over three decades and supporting the estate's ambition to become the UK's first carbon-negative land manager.

'We met on bikes during PedElla,' explains Ross, about how the group got chatting in the first place on the charity group ride organised by Club Peloton in 2013 from London to Paris, and then again from Porto to Lisbon. 'We became friends through a shared interest in designing places that put the pedestrian and cyclist first.' Out on the road, in the peloton, they got talking about how a new approach to providing housing in the countryside could work. Principally, this was around density and placemaking issues, and how new public transport infrastructure can change the way successful communities are planned and built.

Certainly, what won the judges over in that first competition was the team's 'human-scale' approach to sensitively and incrementally accommodating new homes, with flair and imagination. Featherstone explains how the team cycled around the site, got talking to residents and heard their fears about too much car-borne transport. Those residents around Blenheim knew development was

coming, she says, but were fearful of the havoc that this kind of transport can wreak and of cycling on busy roads. 'Talking with local people has shown us that villages need to work together to tackle pressing issues around isolation, road congestion and loss of local shops, pubs and schools,' she said.

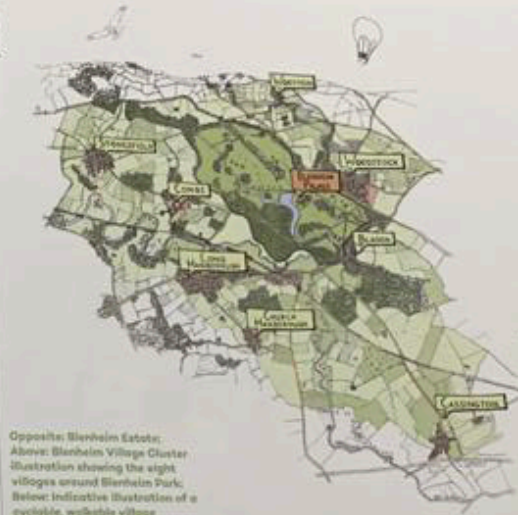
The strategy they have pushed is thus a 'game-changer', adds Featherstone, linking villages with new walking and cycling routes to help foster local community facilities and reduce the need to travel further afield by car. Voila – more sustainable places in which to live and work. 'If you can grow villages in a cluster and link them via bridleways and footpaths, then more of the daily journeys that you do to school and work can be done by cycling and walking, or cycling and walking to the nearest train station. Hence new development or new houses that are going to be bringing in these people will be able to be less dependent on the car.'

Does it help that they're all cyclists? Does it affect the placemaking principles they espouse? Yes, says Featherstone, in that with cycling you see and 'experience' things more, at a slower pace rather than taking the fastest route. You orientate yourself via local topographies, and feel a place much

more. 'I certainly think it makes me a better planner and urban designer,' says Ross. 'You're just so much more in touch. You're not looking at an aeroplane view of what something looks like.' 'Getting lost is quite important,' Featherstone adds, with an aside on even the smells of places and of generally being more immersed.

Does it help that they're all women? 'Probably,' says Riches, suppressing comments about men that she says might bring out more 'trolls'... Most of the entrants in the National Infrastructure Commission competition for the Oxford-Cambridge arc were mostly male, which perhaps meant their approach was towards wanting to 'stamp their mark' and build new stuff, whereas the VeloCity team adopted a 'softer' approach to working with what was there, 'knitting' communities together. Not to mention that they all get on, says Ross. 'I was working with a great group of people, whether they were girls or boys.'

Nevertheless, it has brought about what they describe as a kind of 'gentle radicalism' and working with what is there already rather than wiping the slate clean. There are also stats out there that say more women than men travel on foot and use public transport, says Featherstone, adding that the vision is very much about promoting the sharing economy, whether that is the big back garden, village green, or the streets. And women feel more comfortable in spaces that are less prescriptive and more adaptable, Ross adds. At Blenheim, the connections will be through 'fast tracks' between



Opposite: Blenheim Estate; Above: Blenheim Village Cluster. Illustration showing the eight villages around Blenheim Park; Below: Indicative illustration of a cycleable, walkable village

communities, rather than roads, to cater for what they isolate as a safety fear preventing people from cycling, and allowing for more park and ride at the periphery.

Of course, e-bikes will necessarily be part of the VeloCity vision for future settlements. Featherstone herself was speaking from Wales, where she reports that local bike shops say 90 per cent of their sales are that way now. A survey done by us here at Velocity Magazine echoed that, with the majority of respondents saying they were considering taking the plunge into e-bikes.

The team – which also includes Kay Hughes of Khas, Petra Marko of Marko and Placemakers, and Judith Sykes from Expedition Engineering – are considering setting up formally as a limited company, but at the moment it works as a 'collaboration' of

companies. Looking forward, they believe we need to plan movement and logistics so we can take HGVs out of roads in a more holistic way, with delivery hubs at the edges of cities and towns. 'We can start to make cycling safe, but you need to think of the whole thing – you can't just whack in a cycle route and then it ends,' says Ross. 'You need to have a much more placemaking approach.'

They are particularly focused on the last five miles of journeys and make a plea for people to categorise their movements more – cycling and walking when they can. And in terms of central London now, for example, the situation for new cyclists could be helped by taking cars out of the equation as cities like Barcelona are doing, or only allowing them in certain daily timeframes.

But there is a pro-active and holistic response which is more applicable across the board. Ross again: 'It really is about cranking up the agenda and saying: "Cycling is going to happen here; walking is going to happen here." The car is no longer a priority in cities.' ☐



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