

The housing solution

How can we create rural housing that will be sympathetic to its setting, affordable to build, comfortable to live in and pleasing to look at? The Prince of Wales has challenged Hank Dittmar to come up with an answer

Illustrations by Mark Hoare



Design for a village home by Mark Hoare and Ted Ridge. Its facing materials can be varied according to region

WE are all familiar with the scenario: approaching a familiar and fondly remembered village, we are surprised to see a new housing estate stuck onto its edge. Poorly screened behind some immature trees, there is one road in and out of the estate. Back gardens and their wooden fences face the road, which is elsewhere lined with hedges or stone walls.

If it is an 'executive' estate, the view is dominated by large garages. If it is affordable housing, we will see car parks and a bit of leftover land designated as a children's play area. The windows are probably plastic and there is a hodge-podge of materials—brick, render, pebbledash and timber all seemingly applied without a coherent plan and with a profusion of inappropriate architectural features (or 'gob-ons' as some developers call them). The estate is an alien thing, bearing no relationship to the village or the local vernacular.

Small wonder then that most attempts to introduce new housing into villages or market towns are met with vociferous opposition or scepticism. It is fashionable to decry as Nimbys (Not in My Back Yard) people who oppose new development. Yet Nimbys is often a rational response to the fact that unsympathetic development is cumulatively eroding the character and beauty of our towns, villages and countryside. Perhaps people would respond differently if they could be presented with a different choice: Beauty in My Back Yard (BIMBY)?

There is an urgent need for new housing, particularly in rural areas, and particu-

It is estimated that each house will cost less than £100,000 to build,

larly for local people. The Rev Stuart Burgess, former head of the Commission for Rural Communities, has said that affordable housing is the number-one issue in rural communities.

The gradual widening of the commuter belt has placed pressure on areas near major cities, raising prices and turning some villages into bedroom communities. And the aging of the population has made many formerly isolated parts of the country attractive for quite vigorous retirees, with an attendant impact on house prices. The problem is especially acute in national parks. As a consequence, young people are often forced out.

The Prince of Wales has been active in the area of rural housing affordability for years, both through The Prince's Foundation for Building Community and through Business in the Community. The two charities worked together with a range of estates, companies and housing providers in an Affordable Rural Housing Initiative, which sought to identify and eliminate barriers to providing more housing in the countryside.

The effort resulted in a manual, a design guide and a number of exemplar schemes,

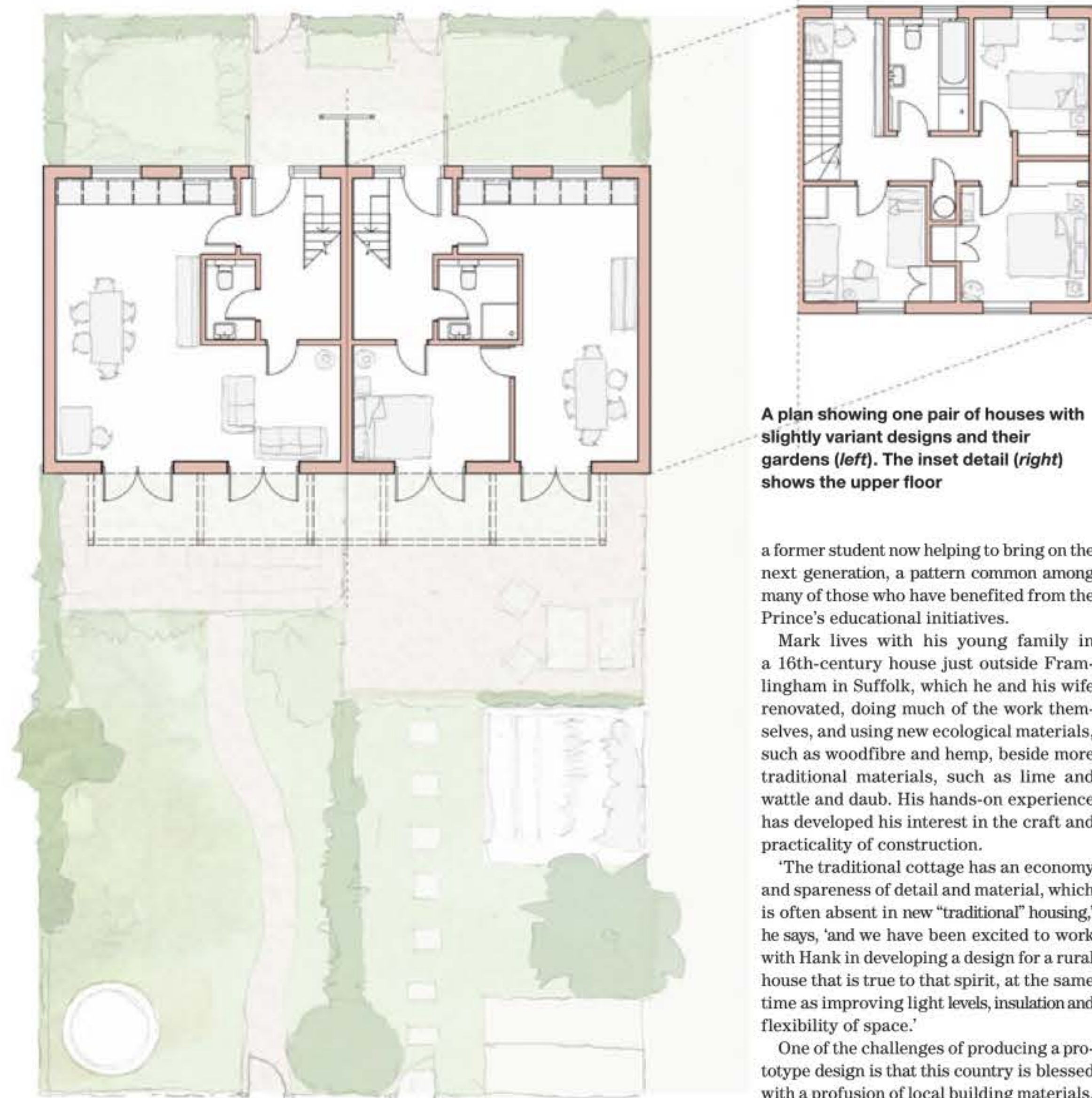
where affordable housing that reflected local character was delivered with the support of local communities as at Pooley Bridge, Cumbria (COUNTRY LIFE, March 30, 2006).

More recently, The Prince's Foundation has been working with a group of volunteers led by trustee Christopher Boyle, barrister and Cumbrian organic farmer, to develop a 'Parish Housing Toolkit'. This provides handy legal documents, financial worksheets and design guidance for parishes wishing to work with developers or housing associations to deliver small housing projects with both private market and affordable housing.

The Prince's Foundation is also working with the North Highland Initiative and the Highland Council to produce a design guide for new housing in Caithness, a stark and beautiful part of Scotland. A similar effort for the Western Isles in Scotland has been funded by The Prince's Countryside Fund (see page 166), a project of Business in the Community supported by the proceeds from sales of Duchy Originals products.

But the proof is in the pudding and, in the end, communities often oppose new housing for two reasons: first, that they fear that it will be a vehicle for undesirable change, and second, that it will degrade the quality and appearance of the community.

The fear of change is an understandable one, and proposals for affordable housing often raise the spectre of people from distant communities being assigned from the waiting list into housing in the village. The Prince's Foundation's Enquiry by Design



A plan showing one pair of houses with slightly variant designs and their gardens (left). The inset detail (right) shows the upper floor

process, which actually puts people in the driving seat when it comes to planning for their own communities, is one tool for helping agree the conditions under which growth might occur.

Enquiry by Design brings residents—who, after all, are the experts on their own communities—together with the specialists—architects, planners, ecologists and the like—in a multi-day workshop. When coupled with new tools that have been provided under the Localism Act 2011—such as the neighbourhood plan, community right to build and community right to challenge—there is no reason that a parish can't demand

a higher-quality development that serves the needs of local people more directly.

For this special issue of COUNTRY LIFE, The Prince of Wales challenged his foundation to produce a design for a rural home, affordable to build and live in, healthy, and beautiful. At His Royal Highness's suggestion, I turned to Mark Hoare and Ted Ridge, two young architects who are former students of The Prince's Foundation and have recently set up a new practice along with Charles Morris, based at Snape Maltings in Suffolk.

Mark is a trustee of the foundation and chairs its education committee and craft-awards panel; he is a good example of

a former student now helping to bring on the next generation, a pattern common among many of those who have benefited from the Prince's educational initiatives.

Mark lives with his young family in a 16th-century house just outside Framlingham in Suffolk, which he and his wife renovated, doing much of the work themselves, and using new ecological materials, such as woodfibre and hemp, beside more traditional materials, such as lime and wattle and daub. His hands-on experience has developed his interest in the craft and practicality of construction.

'The traditional cottage has an economy and sparseness of detail and material, which is often absent in new "traditional" housing,' he says, 'and we have been excited to work with Hank in developing a design for a rural house that is true to that spirit, at the same time as improving light levels, insulation and flexibility of space.'

One of the challenges of producing a prototype design is that this country is blessed with a profusion of local building materials, all of which have contributed to a rich and varied local design palette. Coupled with the fact that many towns and villages have evolved over centuries, the idea of a single prototype may seem to contradict one of The Prince of Wales's core principles, that of reflecting local identity.

Mark and Ted decided to address this by designing a pair of houses, for which materials could be varied according to a locally appropriate palette of materials, and for which details could vary as well. The houses are envisaged as being timber framed with wood-fibre insulation finished in weatherboarding.

In other circumstances, the houses could be finished in render, which can be lime-



This view of an imaginary village illustrates how new houses might be sensitively integrated in a variety of ways within an existing settlement pattern. Three development areas are marked in red. Area A is a small infill site on the high street and area B a former farmyard. The houses built in both these areas are of the kind illustrated in this article. Area C includes a few larger houses on the site of a field near the village centre. These offer a mixture of building sizes and might perhaps generate income for cross-subsidy

washed or through-coloured to suit its local context or geological colouring. Where a masonry appearance is wanted, the houses could be faced with brick, stone or flint, possibly using aerated clay block walls instead of a timber-frame structure.

On the inside, Mark and Ted have tried to reflect the needs families have for open spaces, along with the desire for quiet places for children to study and adults to curl up with a good book. The proposed plan is open and sociable, with the kitchen well connected to the main living and eating spaces. The kitchen sink faces the village street, providing some natural public surveillance.

The living spaces connect directly with the garden, and the back of the house can be opened up to the outdoors. 'The relationship with the landscape, garden and street is critical in creating a natural sense of belonging,' Mark suggests. 'This is, in part, about the choice of materials and, in most cases, simplicity of form, but it is also

Truly, they have designed what we are pleased to call The Prince's Village Home,

a question of keeping the landscaping soft at the edges and allowing plants to climb up or even smother the walls over time.'

At the same time, many of the problems with new homes in villages come from a lack of integration with the existing street pattern or arrangement of houses. Obviously, this is also very site dependent, so we have worked together to suggest three different ways of integrating new homes into a village setting: on the high street, in an arrangement just off the main street, and on a new parallel lane close to the village centre.

All of these options aim to fit in rather than stand out, and to be a part of rather than apart from the community, despite having their own subtly distinctive character. In some village locations, larger buildings than the illustrated houses may also be appropriate.

Mark and Ted have not been bound by the plethora of sometimes conflicting housing standards that constrain some housing associations. Instead, they have designed a pair of houses in which they themselves would be happy to live with their young children—energy-efficient, combining spaciousness and privacy, and with the softness and modest beauty of so many 18th- and 19th-century cottages. Truly, they have designed what we are pleased to call The Prince's Village Home.

Hank Dittmar is Special Adviser to The Prince's Foundation for Building Community (www.princes-foundation.org)



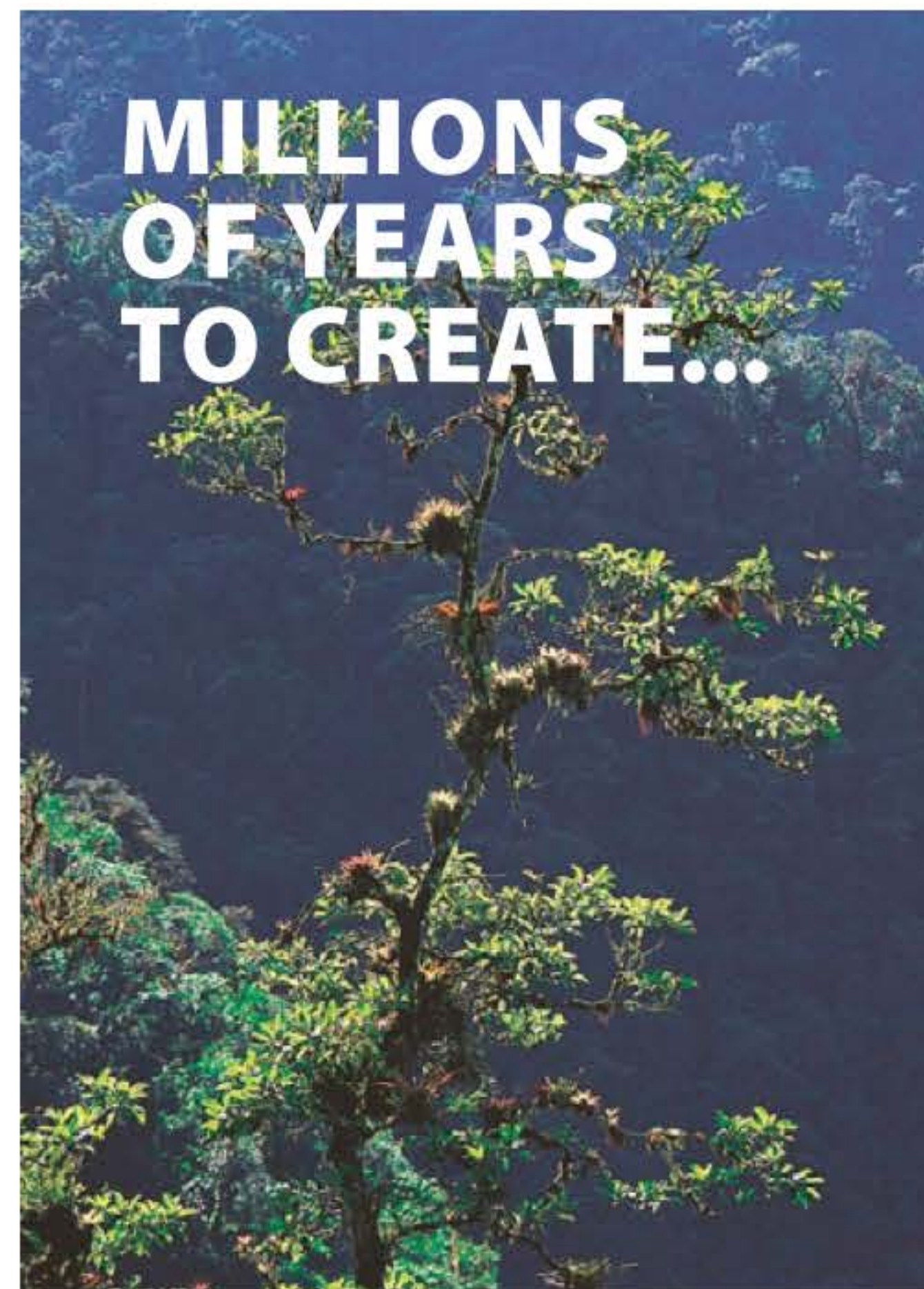
The Prince says: *'If we don't observe local distinctiveness, we run the risk of ruining places.'*

This design is just a template, it can be clad in anything, so you can have thatch, or whatever you like, to make it look appropriate for the area you live in. I hope this design will appeal to villages who are under pressure to build new houses that don't fit in with local vernacular.'

Costing the Prince's Village Home

It is a common misconception that quality is an unaffordable luxury in architecture, yet good design doesn't always cost more. Indeed, COUNTRY LIFE exploded this myth 100 years ago when it published its *Book of Cottages*, with affordable houses designed by architects. Value for money is at the heart of these proposals for The Prince's Village Home.

To prove it, we have asked Natural Building Technologies to evaluate this proposed design for a pair of houses. Land aside, it estimates that each house will cost less than £100,000 to erect. In market terms, this is a competitive price well within the range of normal development costs. The new buildings will also save 65%–75% on energy in comparison with the typical new-build home.



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