

## The Town That Charles Built

Before King Charles III inherited Britain's throne, he was a prince with strong views on architecture. Poundbury is where he tried to put them into practice.



By Alex Marshall

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POUNDBURY, England — On Queen Mother Square in Poundbury, a quaint town in southern England, sits a huge neo-Classical apartment block, painted bright yellow and decorated with Romanesque columns.

A short walk away are several rows of mock-Georgian houses, some with fake clock towers; several red brick “Victorian” warehouses, built a few years ago; and a pink home that resembles a castle, with a modern conservatory attached.

Poundbury is relatively new — construction on it began in the 1990s and is not scheduled to finish for several years — but it is built in a range of architectural styles that had their heyday at least 100 years ago. There are no concrete buildings, as are found in many British city centers, or glass towers with floor-to-ceiling windows.

The town of about 4,600 people has been widely mocked as a prince's plaything and architectural theme park. Yet for one very important man — King Charles III, Britain's new monarch — Poundbury is what British towns should look like.

For nearly four decades, Charles has sought to influence the shape of Britain's urban landscape, using speeches and books to attack modern architecture and highlight alternatives based on classical forms. He has used his wealth and land, too. Before becoming king, Charles was in charge of the Duchy of Cornwall, whose estates make up more than 200 square miles of England and Wales. Since 1987, he has developed several model towns on its land, including Poundbury, to show how his preferences can work in practice.





Poundbury's buildings are in a range of architectural styles. For nearly four decades, Charles has sought to influence the shape of Britain's urban landscape. Francesca Jones for The New York Times

Now Charles, as king, is constrained by tradition from speaking out, and he will have to keep his opinions to himself. This month, in his first speech as monarch, Charles pledged to follow the example of public restraint set by his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, adding that he would not be able to devote “time and energies to the charities and issues for which I care so deeply.” If Charles might have once hoped to transform British architecture so that it looked more like Poundbury’s, he will now have to sit back and watch silently. In that case, Poundbury could end up as the king’s most significant architectural legacy.

The town is governed by some rules that seem to come straight from feudal times. Nobody is allowed to paint their home a new color “without the consent of His Royal Highness,” for example. Other regulations are more modern: Residents aren’t allowed a TV antenna or satellite dish, and they need royal permission to park a motor home outside their properties. This year, a Poundbury resident was ordered to remove almost 100 potted plants from outside her home.

Charles set out his architectural philosophy in 1987 in a book called “A Vision of Britain.” In it, he wrote that the country’s architecture should focus on historical and regional styles, and resist the “creeping cancer” of modernism that was making “everywhere — from Riyadh to Rangoon” look similar. He also set forth 10 architectural principles, including that buildings should not dominate the landscape, that they should be built with local materials to lessen environmental impact and that they should feature enclosures and courtyards to foster a sense of community.

Poundbury, planned by the architect Léon Krier, incorporated those principles as well as several more of Charles’s ideas, including that public housing should be integrated with, and indistinguishable from, private homes and that towns should be walkable.



Poundbury will feature more than 2,500 private homes when completed. Francesca Jones for The New York Times

Quinlan Terry, a British architect who designed many of the buildings in Queen Mother Square, said that Poundbury was a success story: It showed that classical buildings were “easier on the eye” and preferable to brutal, modern architecture. Developers across Britain were now copying its approach, Terry added, with members of the public asking, “Why can’t I live in something like that?”

Yet other British architects say Poundbury is far from perfect. Ian Ritchie, an architect who has criticized what he called Charles’s attempts to “scupper modern architecture,” said that Poundbury was more “a visual statement” and a “romantic notion of what architecture should be” than a deep engagement with questions about how people should live. “There’s nothing remarkable about it, apart from it was done by the Prince of Wales,” Ritchie said.

David Chipperfield, a high-profile architect who Charles once praised for his renovation of Berlin’s 19th-century Neues Museum, said that he supported many of the ideas that informed Poundbury’s design, including the notion that buildings should have a low environmental impact. The problem, he said, was that many developers who were inspired by Poundbury ignored those wider ideas and focused simply on its mix of historical styles. “Now we have developments all over England which are little traditional buildings,” Chipperfield said, “but with no notion of public space, no idea of community, or the environment.”

Charles, who studied history at university, said in a 2009 speech that his interest in architecture had emerged as a teenager when he “became profoundly aware of the brutal destruction that was being wrought” on Britain’s towns and cities by modernist developers with their concrete designs.



Buildings in Poundbury. Charles set out his architectural philosophy in a 1987 book in which he wrote that Britain's architecture should focus on historical and regional styles. Francesca Jones for The New York Times

Yet most of the British public were unaware of this passion until 1984, when he gave a speech at an event for the Royal Institute of British Architects. “For far too long, planners and architects have consistently ignored the feelings and wishes of the mass of ordinary people in this country,” he said. Architects were designing homes for critics, not tenants, Charles added, and they were filling London’s skyline with one “giant glass stump” after another.

Charles then took aim at a proposed extension to the neo-Classical building housing the National Gallery that had been drawn up by the architecture firm Ahrends, Burton and Koralek. The plan, which included a modern-looking curved glass courtyard, was, according to Charles, “a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend.” (Not long afterward, Ahrends, Burton and Koralek’s proposal was dropped.)

Charles has also intervened more directly, including several moves to stifle projects by Richard Rogers, the Pritzker Prize-winning architect who designed the Pompidou Center in Paris.

In March 2009, Charles wrote to the prime minister of Qatar about a project Rogers was developing at Chelsea Barracks, a former military site in London. In the letter, later revealed in court papers, Charles said that his “heart sank” when he saw Rogers’s plans for a series of apartment blocks of glass, steel and concrete. Charles urged the government of Qatar, whose sovereign wealth fund was involved with the development, to reconsider “before it is too late.” A few months later, after Charles met the emir of Qatar in private to discuss the proposal, Qatar dropped the plan.

Rogers, in interviews at the time, called Charles’s behavior “unconstitutional.” “I don’t believe that the Prince of Wales understands architecture,” Rogers wrote in his 2017 memoir, “A Place for All People.”

“He thinks it is fixed at one point in the past,” Rogers added, “rather than an evolving language.”



A playground in Poundbury. According to Charles’s architectural principles, buildings should not dominate the landscape, should be built with local materials, and should feature enclosures and courtyards to foster a sense of community. Francesca Jones for The New York Times

Charles has repeatedly tried to justify his interventions. “Let me point out that I don’t go around criticizing other people’s private artworks,” he said in a 2009 speech. But, he added, “architecture defines the public realm, and it should help to define us as human beings, and to symbolize the way we look at the world.”

Several architects said they felt that, now Charles was king, he would stop weighing in. “He’ll be preoccupied with matters of state,” Ritchie said. Chipperfield agreed, saying that he expected Charles would be “much more careful about getting involved with any individual cases,” but he added that he hoped Charles would still comment on the state of architecture and Britain’s environment.

“I don’t see what’s wrong with that,” Chipperfield said. “We don’t have enough people in political positions who are reflecting on what things should be like.”

In Poundbury, 10 residents said in interviews that they also felt that Charles would most likely stop campaigning against architecture he disliked, no matter the temptation to speak up. But several said there was one architectural cause that they thought he would never relinquish: Poundbury itself.



Fran Leaper, the editor of Poundbury Magazine, said that the town was Charles's "project." Few residents disagreed with his interventions because they love the architecture and sense of community, she added. Francesca Jones for The New York Times

Sitting in the garden of her mock-Georgian townhouse, Fran Leaper, the editor of Poundbury Magazine, said that the town was "his project."

Charles "always says, 'It's my Poundbury,'" Leaper noted, adding that it was said in the town that he had endorsed every design aspect, right down to the door fittings. Few residents disagreed with interventions like those because they love the architecture and sense of community, she added; although, she conceded, many would like to install more modern window frames. The wooden ones they are obliged to keep were drafty, she said.

The development will be complete in a few years, Leaper noted, and its final mix of 2,700 homes is to include some cottages with thatched roofs, adding even more styles to the historical mix.

Poundbury was Charles's architectural legacy, Leaper said, and a successful one at that — it was just a legacy that happened to be, as she described it, "quirky with a capital Q."