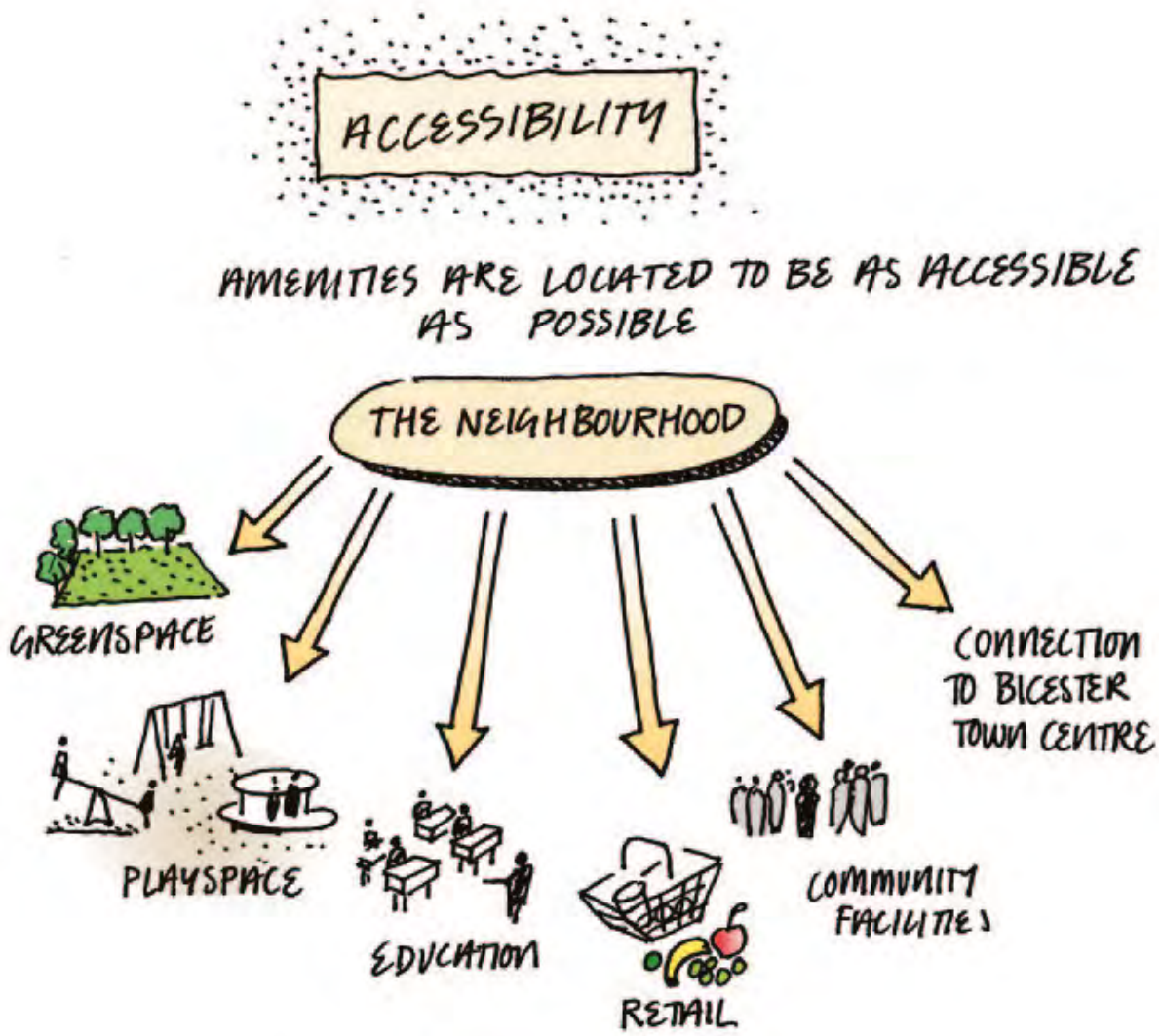
Field grain – a mixed-use vision for the countryside

We need to escape from our old ways of thinking about the Green Belt and the way land is used to really appreciate the economic and health benefits they give us, says Peter Barbalov



RIGHT: Amenity Accessibility at Bicester ©Farrells



Peter Barbalov is a Design Partner at Farrells

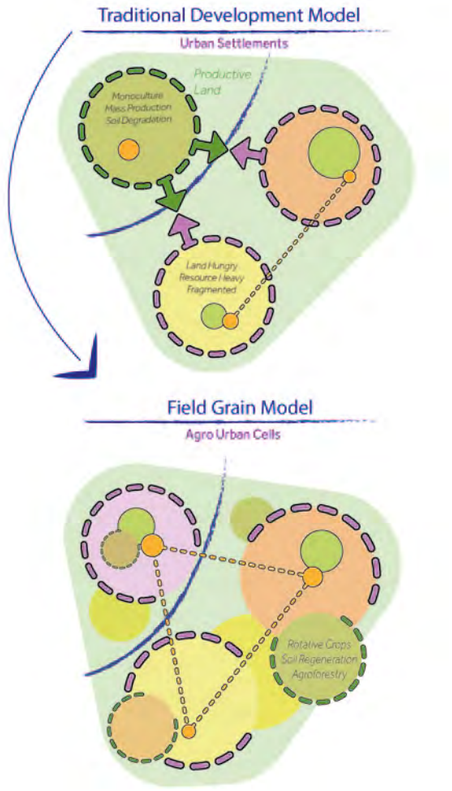
A recent competition for redevelopment of a green belt land in the Southeast of England has led to us revisiting our earlier thinking on the matter. We live in challenging times where we need to question and revisit our ways of thinking. The debate for and against the green belt has to move on as a result of the pandemic reminding us how essential nature is. It does not just form the background to our lives but an intrinsic part of who we are and how we are going to live in the future. We have to think and design for long-term, if a tree grows 25m tall in 20-25 years for instance, we need to give nature its time and space, and learn to live alongside it.

What if there was a different way of reconciling limited land and natural resources with the need to create more homes. We all accept mixed-use in cities - can we accept mixed-use in the countryside?

At Farrells, we have long advocated that landscape and nature are the first infrastructure, a concept that is exemplified in our earlier and award-winning projects. Starting with the masterplan and successful redevelopment of Cambourne in Cambridgeshire, which begun in 1996. Over 3,000 new homes are being delivered in a masterplan which envisaged three interlinked villages planned around village greens. This long-term strategic thinking of landscape driving regeneration was further developed in our vision for Thames Gateway, believing in the potential that East London and the Estuary have to accommodate London's future growth. Our early proposals for a "Thames National Park" reaching through the city to the limit of the tide at Teddington, aimed to celebrate London's urban and rural relationship.

We further developed this thinking in our masterplan for Bicester Eco-Town, signposting a new sustainable future for the whole of Bicester, where the historic town-centre becomes once again the focus of civic, cultural and economic life. Our concept revealed layers that go to make up the 'place' - the character of the natural landscape as well as the imprint of human activity. To >>>

RIGHT:
Field Grain Model
©Farrells



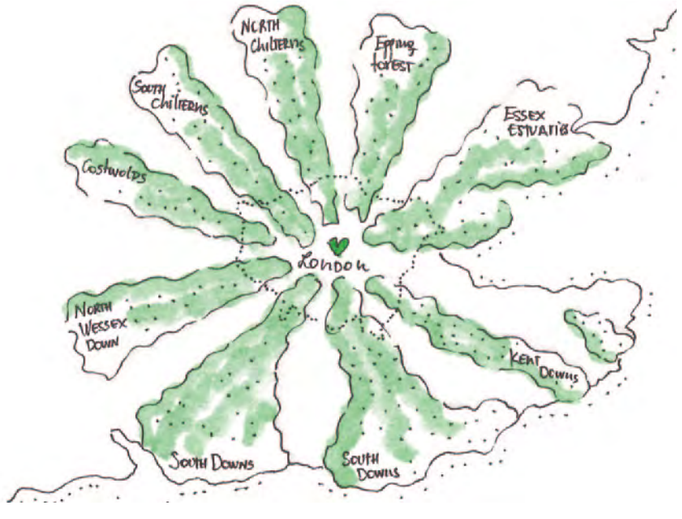
>>> allow the eco-development to evolve gradually and organically over time, we proposed the use of farmsteads as the nuclei around which the new community is grown and thus built upon the existing settlement pattern. In this way, the new eco-development will be designed to create local employment, accommodate climate change, consciously contribute to ecological balance, and enable and encourage more sustainable lifestyles.

In recent years we have also learnt the importance of open source and accessible data. As the pandemic has shown, we don't have the answers and we need to rely on the best tools to predict and design for the future. Today, the ample data available allows us to map and record land features and its evolving patterns. We should make the most of these resources and use them to inform our design decisions, to help mitigate the effects of our interventions in the land and ensure a long-term view of our proposals.

We live in a country with limited land resource and one of the highest population densities in Europe. The same country has large parts of the land protected from development for homes - from private land to Strategic Industrial Land and Green Belt, all representing forms of enclosure, separation and control. Recent debate and attempts to release industrial land or create co-location of industrial and homes has proven difficult and counter intuitive. Why can't we have co-location of working land and homes? A view of a farm or field with crops for instance, beats the one of a working wharf, having the added benefit of food next door and the ability to have a walk through the field - not many would opt to walk through a loading bay.

The Green belt in the UK is controversial: it reduces land supply, separates communities and inhibits natural growth. However, the answer we propose is not for abolition but for integration, especially along transport corridors and existing communities, as it will bring development closer to them rather than further out. Our proposal is for integration and gradual accession, which we call the 'Field Grain.'

BELOW:
Green Braces
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To fight the climate crisis, we have two simultaneous routes, intensify and densify our cities to concentrate resources but also work with the land to integrate communities with production - urban grain and field grain. These are not mutually exclusive but represent a unique way of tackling the climate crisis we face.

Green Belt exists to provide open space and to prevent urban sprawl. The Field Grain makes open land free to roam, productive and pleasant. Close to a station, with last mile facilities to make cars obsolete, it represents a way of living with the land.

Our proposed strategies to enable this new way of thinking are summarized:

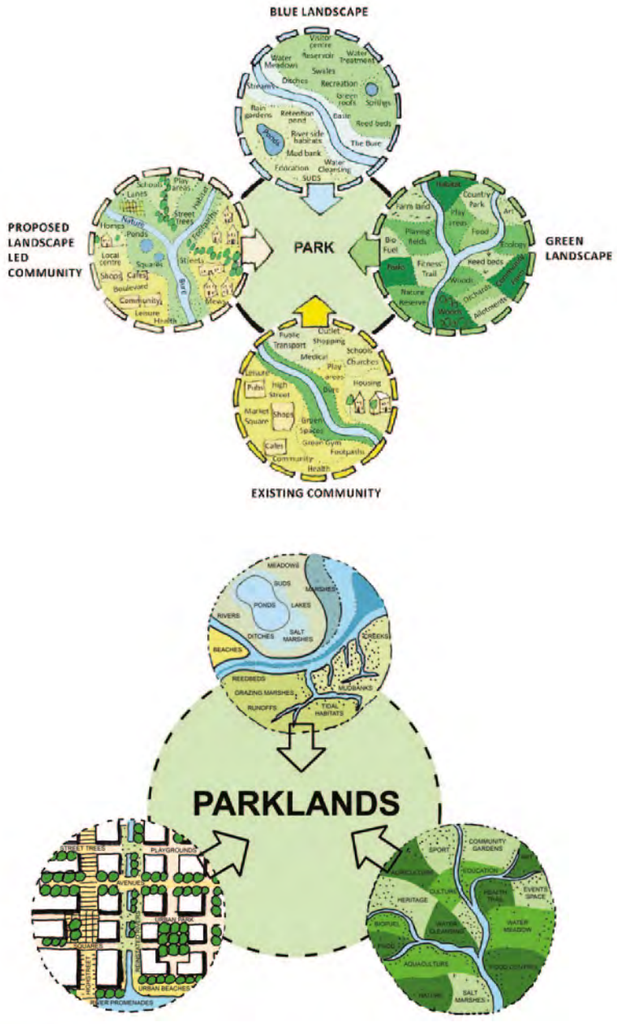
1 Green Belt and development are often seen as contradictory. Traditional efforts of blending new homes with green infrastructure have often resulted in fragmented landscapes, a culture of superseding rather than incorporating. We propose a methodology to create a new organic environment, one where boundaries are broken, and land uses are mixed.

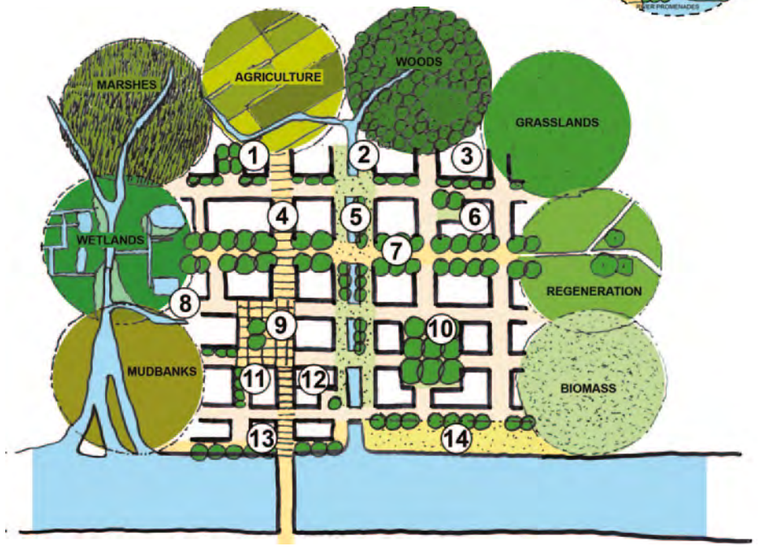
2 We propose to break this 'either-or' mentality.

We offer an approach that respects and learns from the existing and historic spatial, social, environmental, and economic characteristics to create a grain which is embedded in its location, history, communities, and landscape - the 'Field Grain'.

3 Land uses will be mixed between each parcel. Next to new homes and employment areas, green infrastructure will create productive landscapes, such as allotments, orchards, pixel gardens, and greenhouses as community hubs. This will create vibrant communities for innovation and research, and curate an ecosystem that fosters experience, learning and exchange, like cells in a living organism, each contributing to the whole.

4 The delivery of large masterplans takes time. Our approach will allow the land to remain productive until ready for development. Crops will be managed to promote sustainable socio-economic activities through rotative agriculture (short cycles) and agroforestry (long cycles). This will promote soil regeneration, encourage circular economy practices, and maximize the opportunity to generate resources for construction. >>>



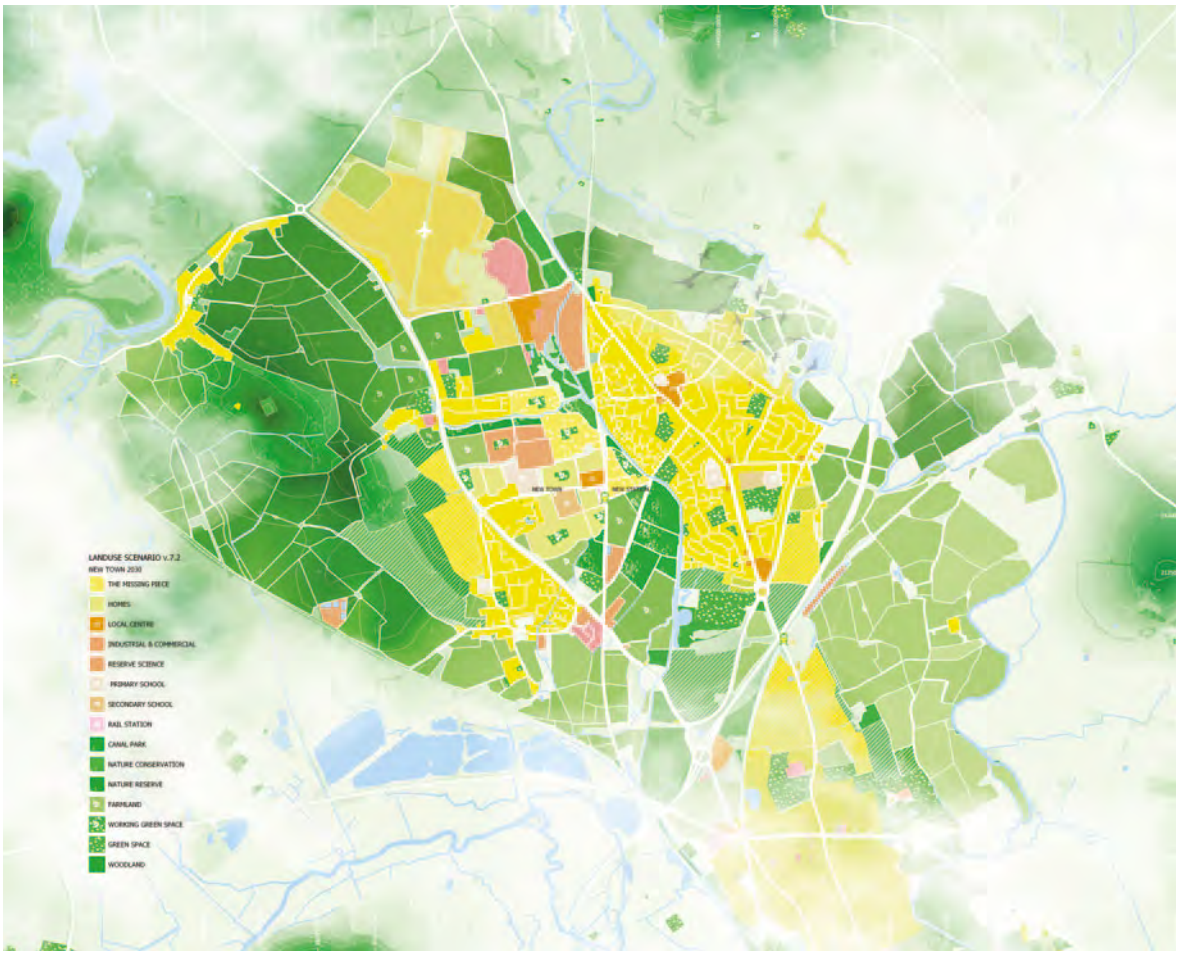


TOP:
A Variety of Landscape & Infrastructure for Otterpool Masterplan
©Farrells

ABOVE:
Thames Estuary _ Parklands Vision for a Mixed Use Grain
©Farrells

LEFT:
Thames Estuary_Masterplan for a Mixed-use Countryside
©Farrells >>>

RIGHT:
Field Grain Approach for a Green Belt site
©Farrells



BELOW:
Thames Parklands Masterplan
©Farrells

>>> We started the debate sometime ago with 'Landscape as the first infrastructure', this led us to re-imagine the Green Belt as 'Green Braces' – allowing growth along transport corridors to ensure true connectivity and better accessibility between existing and new landscape corridors generating a planned, connected and productive network of green spaces. Now we propose the adoption of "Field Grain', mixed use communities in the countryside.

To conclude, as John Maynard Keynes said: '…the difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones.'

We need to escape from our old ways of thinking about the Green Belt and the way land is used to really appreciate the economic and health benefits they give us and create new tools and ways to capture their benefits, to grow and enhance them.

