

# Location, location, location

Pt. 3

## First time buyer to first time seller – what to look for when buying your first home

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sue McGlynn and Garry Hall are urban designers and members of Transform Places, a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to raising the standards of new and existing neighbourhoods. If you would like to find out more, you can visit their website at [transformplaces.com](http://transformplaces.com)



In the final part of our series on identifying great neighbourhoods, experts Sue McGlynn and Garry Hall discuss how homes relate to their immediate surroundings and what different designs can mean for your quality of life.

In our previous two articles we started a journey, first moving through a neighbourhood and then down a street leading towards your potential home. In this final article we reach your front door and deal with all the aspects that are literally closest to home! There are some great guides available that will teach you about things like energy efficiency, types of construction, interior design and storage, so we're not going to cover those issues here. Instead, we will focus on how to make sure that your home works for you and your lifestyle.

Even for the first time buyer there will usually be a wide variety of homes available, from apartments in high- or low-rise blocks to terraced, semi-detached and detached houses. The look of your home is very much a matter of personal taste, but good design will add value regardless of style or period. If you're struggling to get on to the first rung of the property ladder, you may think that you can't afford good design and have to settle for more basic requirements. However, good design need not cost more, and we are going to set out some top tips for getting the best value and quality of life from your new home.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS – ARRIVING AT YOUR FRONT DOOR

We've arrived in front of your home, which is one of the most important features of your property. This first sighting may only last a few seconds, but in this short time people will form an opinion about its appearance and probably



IMAGE 1 Doors at the front are attractive and convenient



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about you, too! There is an expression that says first impressions count and can be nearly impossible to undo, so it's important to make the right impact and ensure your home has 'kerb appeal'. In practice, this means that your home should have an attractive front door or entrance that is clearly visible and accessible from the kerb side. There do not have to be roses round the door, but a well-designed entrance to your home is a real asset whether you choose to live in a house or an apartment. It's amazing what a lick of paint will do to turn a front door into a really attractive entrance. [Image 1]

## GOOD MANNERS MATTER, EVEN FOR BUILDINGS!

We discussed in the last article why buildings should face the street from the perspective of safety and surveillance for people moving about in your neighbourhood. It's rude to turn your back on people and the same is true for buildings, so try to avoid hidden 'front' doors located at the side or rear of a house. Worst of all is a front door that is only accessible from a rear car parking court. This arrangement will mean that your building is turning its back on the rest of the world, and it is likely that your home will suffer from reduced convenience, privacy and security as a result.

## PARKING YOUR CAR OR BIKE

For most people, the ideal solution is to park either to the front or side of their home. The next best option is probably on-street parking, which we covered last time. If a parking court is your only option, don't assume that it has to be at the back of the property. Look for private forecourt parking screened from the street rather than one that is tucked around the back. [Image 2]

Rear courts offer a private parking space, but make sure that they are secure and you don't have to walk too far from your car to your door. If you have lots of bags of shopping or it's raining, you'll want to be close to your front door. The police guidance, Secured by Design, now discourages rear parking courts because there is little surveillance and so greater risk of theft or damage to your car. [Image 3]

## CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

There is an important zone between the street and your front door. This zone, whether it is as small as a doorstep or a larger area of front garden or parking space, marks the boundary between what is public space and what is private. Don't worry if the property does not have a front garden – some of our best-loved houses have no front garden at all. But if the



IMAGE 2 Look for parking at the front rather than in rear courts



IMAGE 3 Parking areas to the rear of your home leave your garden less secure

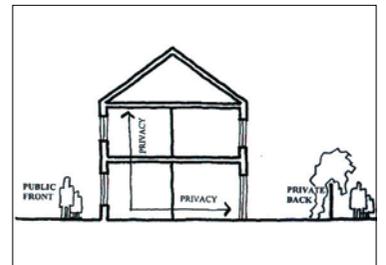


IMAGE 4 The layout of your home affects your privacy





IMAGE 5 Alleyways like this do not feel safe and secure to use



IMAGE 6 Outdoor spaces add enjoyment and value to your home



IMAGE 7 Think about how you'll store your bins and recycling boxes

property is set back then you can create an attractive front garden that will distinguish your home from others in the street. Low walls, fences or railings are perfect as they will mark your territory, add privacy for ground floor rooms so that people don't get too close to your windows and will also screen cars and bins from the street view. Simple shrubs or roses planted in tubs work very well, and they look attractive, too.

### FRONTS AND BACKS – PRIVACY AND SECURITY

If you read last month's article, you will know that buildings placed to face the street with door and windows overlooking it will provide residents and passers-by with a sense of security and community. Now you need to think about your own home and how it will provide you with both privacy and security without turning its back on the street.

The first thing to note is how the front and the back of the home are arranged in relation to any public or private space. Think about the way that rooms are arranged and bear in mind how you intend to use them, making sure that your most private activities are located away from where people are likely to be passing by. Traditionally, rooms for activities that are not

very private, such as cooking, sitting, talking or eating, have been located at the front of a house. They do not suffer from the glances of people moving past and your presence in these rooms and views of the street will help to keep it safe. More private spaces, such as bathrooms and bedrooms, are usually located upstairs or towards the back of the home well away from the public gaze. If you are choosing an apartment, try to avoid one that has bedrooms on the ground floor street front or next to communal areas at the ground floor rear.

At the rear of your home try to make sure the amenity space, whether your own private garden or shared communal space, backs on to other gardens rather than being next to a public street, footpath or open garage court. This will make your property more secure and will certainly make sitting in the garden or outside space far more enjoyable and private. [Image 4]

If the rear boundary of the property has a wall or fence that's next to a public space or route, you might find yourself paying to remove graffiti and fixing other vandalism. Worse than that, research has shown that homes with this kind of arrangement are much more likely to be broken into as it is so much easier for burglars to hop over the fence without being seen. New houses designed using Secured by Design principles have half the number of burglaries and 40% fewer vehicle crimes. [Image 5]



## SPACE AND LIGHT

Over the past few decades the floor area of new homes built in England has been getting smaller, with homes built between 1980 and 2000 being 10% smaller on average than those built before 1980. But 70% of homebuyers consider space to be the most important design feature in a home so you need to be armed with the right information when you are viewing and comparing homes. In the UK we tend to use the number of bedrooms to describe the size of a property. But a much more accurate measure is the floor area. Ask the estate agent to provide the net (rather than gross) internal floor area – this is a measure of the total usable internal space, including corridors and staircases. You can work out the value of a property by dividing the price by the net floor area: this will give you the best way of comparing one property with another and getting the most space for your money.

A well-designed house will have its windows positioned to take advantage of any good views of the landscape, street, roof tops and skylines. Internally, the way that space is arranged will affect how you feel about the property. It should match your lifestyle, so think of the needs of your household and whether you prefer open plan arrangements or separate rooms for separate functions. In practice, as a first time buyer, you may have to compromise on space so an open plan layout is likely to make the place feel more spacious. High ceilings and sufficient storage space will also have this effect. Finally, the amount of daylight and sunlight that comes into your home may really affect your mood and feeling of well-being so think through when you prefer to have sun in your different rooms.

## YOUR OWN OASIS – GARDENS, TERRACES AND BALCONIES

Even if we dream of living in a country cottage most of us actually live in a built-up neighbourhood. So the quality of our outdoor space can be vital to the enjoyment of a home and will be a real asset when selling on. If you have had to compromise on the number of rooms you can afford, then a small garden offers a valuable extra outdoor 'room'. You will get the most out of it if it is sheltered, sunny and attractively planted. Check out taller buildings nearby that may affect the amount of sun that reaches your garden at particular times of day.

Balconies and terraces can be useful so you have some private outdoor space where you can sit outside. You'll need to ensure that it's safe before using a barbecue if you have another balcony above you. As with gardens,

try to go for a south or west facing balcony or terrace, but if you can't then look for sliding doors or panels that can enclose the space to make a mini winter garden. [Image 6]

Even the smallest space outside your home can add to its appeal and you can make it special by adding pots and plants.

## RUBBISH AND RECYCLING

In all the excitement of looking for a new home it's easy to overlook the more boring details. You will need to know how rubbish and recycling are dealt with in the area and where bins are stored and collected from. If this is from the front but there is no front garden, then you'll be wheeling your bin through the house each week, and it is likely that many people will just leave their bins outside. So much for first impressions! [Image 7]

Also, try to find out about future plans as many councils are now subdividing collections, which means you may need even more space to store bins and boxes.

## KEEPING YOUR COSTS DOWN

Regardless of style, a well-constructed home that is efficient to run will keep maintenance and utilities bills down. Energy efficiency should be taken for granted in new homes, but you should check this with the developer or seller. If you are buying off-plan, check that the builder is registered with the NHBC. Look out for energy saving features that are good for the planet and good for your pocket. Noise from neighbours can spoil the enjoyment of your home so check out that new homes meet the current acoustic standards to prevent noise transfer between properties. [Image 8]

A well-designed home will meet our changing needs and lifestyles by providing flexible layouts that can be used in different ways by different people. Homes that can be extended, either into a loft or by the addition of a new room, will also add value and re-sale appeal. 

We hope you have found this series useful and interesting and that it helps you choose the very best home in the very best neighbourhood that you can afford. Following this guide will help when you want to sell up and move on, too, so use it as part of your longer-term plans for climbing the property ladder.

### TOP TIPS

#### CHOOSING YOUR HOME

- 1 First impressions matter – choose a home with 'kerb appeal'.
- 2 Check for convenient, secure and overlooked parking spaces.
- 3 Check for a clear boundary at the front of your property.
- 4 Make sure that your 'front' faces the street and your 'back' is enclosed for greater privacy and security.
- 5 Avoid properties where there is a public route or public space at the rear boundary – this will make your home more vulnerable to break-ins.
- 6 Outdoor space is important for the enjoyment of your home – even the smallest space will be a real asset and add value.
- 7 Ask the estate agent for net internal floor areas so you can compare properties and get the most space for your money.
- 8 A small garden offers a valuable extra outdoor 'room'.
- 9 Check out orientation to make sure you get most sun where and when you prefer it.
- 10 A well-constructed home will keep bills down – energy-saving features are good for the planet and good for your pocket.



IMAGE 8 Green technology keeps costs down and adds value