



## Urridaholt

The Urridaholt project is a large-scale urban extension located in the Gardabaer municipality, on the outskirts of Reykjavik. Recently, the Icelandic economy has experienced strong growth, and this, together with falling occupancy rates and increased immigration, has created a strong housing market. As a result, many local authorities are looking to improve their finances/service by increasing their population and generating higher tax revenues.

In Iceland land is generally cheap and plentiful, and this is fueling urban sprawl. Driving out from the intimate central core of Reykjavik 101, the European model of compact urban form soon gives way to a North American scenario with large, low-density, residential suburbs consisting of mainly single-storey housing, with double garages, set in a landscape of vast vehicular infrastructure. Here, people are pushed apart, distances become too far to walk, pavements disappear, and bus routes become unviable. Everything has become designed around the car.

### Process and Project Development

Although identified for residential expansion, the site at Urridaholt was environmentally sensitive: An entire hill with panoramic views of the spectacular surrounding landscape, encompassing mountains, volcanoes, a lava field and the ocean. It also overlooked a shallow lake of high ecological value. As a result, the design process began in late 2003 with a series of community planning exercises involving a wide range of stakeholders. The primary aim of these was to create a consensus-led vision for the site, but the events also revealed a general dissatisfaction with the current (zonal) planning

approach in Iceland, and how this was leading to increasing amounts of time being spent in the car. Through dialogue, the participants came to an agreement that what they wanted was to live in a more sustainable, mixed-use neighbourhood.

As the masterplanning work began, the design team took key stakeholders (including the client, landowners, planning officers, local politicians and the mayor) on a 'seeing is believing' study tour to Sweden (Bo01) and Germany (Freiburg) to witness at first hand more progressive approaches to planning. The project was then developed using a set of locally inflected urban design solutions. These were based on best practice, but tailored to the specific location: 'glocal' (global + local) solutions to sustainable placemaking.

### Urban Design Principles

Four main urban design principles were used in the development of the masterplan:-

#### *Mixed-use Placemaking*

The scheme utilises mixed-use principles, not seen in Iceland outside of the small, downtown '101' area of Reykjavik, and includes 1650 residential units, 90,000m<sup>2</sup> of business use, a college, a high school, three kindergartens, health and social facilities, a church, swimming pool, retail units and arts/culture uses. Public buildings that create the most activity were located around a highly sheltered space on the top of the hill, surrounded by a series of residential neighbourhoods each with their own identity. Densities vary across the site in response to the underlying topography, and increase towards focal points to permit a natural sense of wayfinding.



#### *Hillside development*

Many studies of the hillside were carried out before a final block structure was established. The design team was particularly concerned with long distance views, and an organic approach to urban design was adopted to allow the built form to respond more sympathetically to the topography, and create an impression of a traditional hilltop settlement. Views from the hill were maximised to add value to the development, and the roofscape carefully designed to ensure views towards the lake were not compromised. A network of streets with different characters were laid out along the contours, intersecting at regular intervals with a second system permitting traffic to climb to the top of the hill. More direct pedestrian routes were used to link the top of the hill with various points around the base, including a pier in the lake.

#### *Winter Cities*

The masterplan was also heavily influenced by urban design research carried out during the 1980's in Canada, which formed the basis for the Winter Cities Movement. This was developed in response to the failure of projects in northern latitudes where designers had used inappropriate urban design approaches and spatial typologies drawn from other climatic zones, especially southern Europe.

Using Winter City approaches, the built environment was structured to ameliorate the physiological and psychological effects of the long, dark and harsh winters experienced in Iceland. A more favourable microclimate was developed using barrier buildings and landscape belts, to create shelter public space, and the detailing of buildings to break wind speeds and stop funnelling effects. A snow management regime was also devised to allow local storage in areas where it allowed children to play with/on it, whilst clearing movement paths.

In terms of psychological effects, a strong use of colour has been used throughout the scheme to provide a vibrant environment on even the darkest of days, a strategy supplemented by an attractive approach to street lighting. The overall aim of both the physiological and psychological approaches was to create an outdoor environment that can be used for longer periods of the year, and to encourage the development of events/communal activities, which can help with people's sense of well being during the winter months.

#### *Natural environment*

The natural environment exerted a strong influence on the development proposals, which feature the first large-scale sustainable drainage system in Iceland, and the only known example of a hillside application in Europe. The system was fully integrated in the masterplan to ensure that the ecologically sensitive lake, which is also protected by an environmental exclusion zone, will not dry up in summer.

#### **Outcomes and critical reflection**

In November 2006, the masterplan was officially adopted by the Local Authority, and has since been selected by the National Planning Agency as a best practice approach to development in Iceland, for a Scandinavian research project looking at urban design in northern latitudes. In early 2007, the project won an Urban Design Citation from the Boston Society of Architects. This success was achieved against both the prevailing planning norms and actual regulations, and the design team is hoping to meet with the National Planning Agency to share its experiences, and outline the areas in which the project might inform future policy. Work at Urridaholt is due to start on site in 2008 and if it is commercially successful, may herald the moment that country switches from urban sprawl towards more compact forms of development.