

Urban Maestro

New governance strategies
for Urban Design

The Place Alliance

a movement campaigning for place quality
(UK)

Matthew Carmona
Professor of Planning
and Urban Design,
University College London

www.matthew-carmona.com

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1. SUMMARY

The Place Alliance aims to put design quality back on the national agenda in England. It does this through building an evidence base, working through a network, and campaigning at the national level. Being university (rather than government) based, it is entirely informal in its operation, having no power at all (hard or soft) except for the legitimacy given to it by the evidence base it builds, the neutral stance it adopts (it only takes the side of place quality, not that of any government or set of actors), and the network of willing supporters and volunteers it nurtures. This case study draws from a detailed [five-year review](#) of the initiative (see references) that itself involved extensive interviews and the detailed tracing of impacts over time.

2. CONTEXT AND ADMINISTRATION

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, England saw a withdrawal of funding from, and the watering down of national policy and commitment to, the achievement of better-quality development and places. Consequently, a major leadership gap emerged. Place Alliance was subsequently established in order to help fill that gap through collective and collaborative action across the sector, and specifically beyond the Government.

In 2014, Place Alliance was established by UCL (University College London) as an informal network to encourage collaboration and collective leadership in the quest for better place quality. Increasingly, it has developed a campaigning role and does so through direct engagement and the dissemination of targeted research and thought leadership to key governmental, professional and community audiences. Place Alliance provides a forum for its supporters to come together, debate and work towards raising the national consciousness regarding the importance of place quality. All are welcome and there are no joining fees or charges for Place Alliance events.

Uniting the many organisations that now support Place Alliance is the belief that the quality of the built environment has profound health, social, economic and environmental impacts. The empirical evidence for this 'Place Value' has been gathered by the Place Alliance through one of its tools – www.place-value-wiki.net – which has shown that "Place quality is not a mysterious and luxurious aspiration only to be considered when things are good or only for the wealthy. Instead, it is a basic necessity of urban life with profound and far-reaching impacts

on the lives of citizens today and tomorrow. It is so important to our basic well-being that it should be the expectation of all.”

Since its establishment, the Place Alliance has held ten BIG MEET conferences bringing together thousands of participants from across governmental, NGO, industry, and community sectors. The organisation has over 1000 supporters representing hundreds of organisations, its work is freely distributed, and its evidence and knowledge tools provide a free resource for others to use. As one supporter noted “the new alliance provides powerful collective voice on questions of place quality and facilitates cross-sector discussion and debate around improving our everyday environment.”

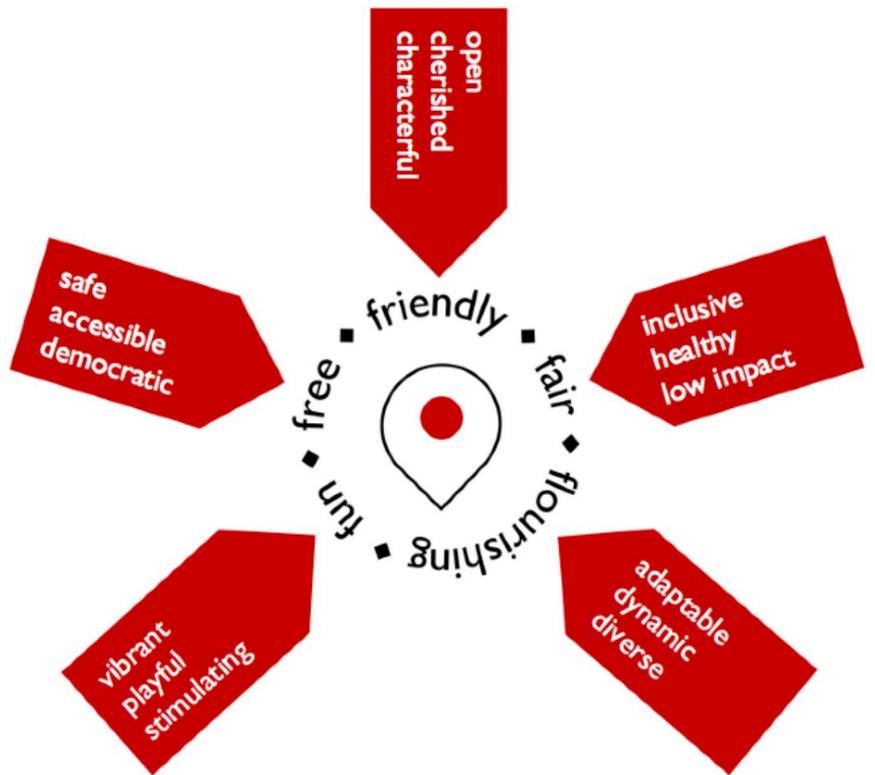
So far, the Place Alliance has limited its operations to England, as other parts of the UK did not suffer the same cuts in this critical area of national policy and practice. With UCL now part of the EU-funded Urban Maestro project, it is hoped that using other cases in Europe as examples and learning opportunities can inform its practices going forward, for example in its recent campaign to establish a [Design Quality Unit in England](#).

3. OBJECTIVES

Place Alliance was set up with a view to influence the delivery of high-quality places. It defines these as places that are friendly, fair, flourishing, fun, and free (the five ‘F’s).

The network’s driving ambition is to help establish a culture whereby place quality becomes a regular fixture in public debate and a continuous and accepted criterion in all new development, regeneration, conservation and urban management processes in England. The organisation’s literature defines this as a culture where:

- Place quality has a value that is recognised by all
- The quality of buildings, streets and spaces is always given a high priority by those who have the power to shape them
- National and local government recognises the vital contribution of the quality of place to the economic, social and cultural life of the nation and to achieving environmental sustainability
- The professionals that are responsible for making and managing places work constructively together and with local communities to shape high quality local environments.



Year 2020, finds Place Alliance in its sixth year of operation. Its core aims going forward are to:

- Inspire and raise aspirations for places
- Support dialogue and collaboration to improve place quality
- Build and share evidence, knowledge and resources
- Influence policy, practice and behaviour to achieve better place quality
- Be open and accessible to all interested individuals and organisations.

4. THE TOOL / INITIATIVE: DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Place Alliance's initiatives encompass a wide range of actions and tools, from evidence reports and practical guides to campaigns, networking events, and conferences. Place Alliance has played an active role in supporting the network by organising design training for public sector professionals and facilitating cross-disciplinary working groups as a space to organise specific areas for action. Place Alliance takes an active role in influencing policy by participating in a collective campaigning effort along with a range of allied organisations and by gathering and generating evidence to influence decision makers.

Place Alliance's initiatives are clustered around three areas:

1. The Analysis Initiatives – research, evidence and evaluation.
2. The Information Initiatives – Practical guides (Place value Ladder and Place Value Wiki); Design Skills Summer Schools for the public sector and currently three active working groups (urban rooms, arts and place, and education and place).
3. The Persuasion Initiatives – Partnerships for specific campaigns alongside the national and regional BIG MEETs.



4.1. Analysis initiatives

Through its body of work, Place Alliance supports evidence-based discussion at the national and local levels. The analysis initiatives broadly refer to the sorts of background research and evidence gathering (in collaboration with partners) that can be used to facilitate an evidence-based conversation and ultimately influence more informed policy and practice. These outputs and results are presented in an accessible manner to related stakeholders, including to national policymakers, local authorities and professionals, as well as to lay audiences.

Research efforts began with [Design Skills in English Local Authorities](#), a report that summarises the findings of a national survey of urban design skills / resources within local planning authorities nationally and how they have changed over the last five years. *Reviewing Design Review in London* examines a range of design review cases in London, with the findings based upon in-depth interviews with applicants, designers, panellists and panel managers, providing a 360-degree analysis of the diversity of design review practices across London and the benefits that stem from high-quality provision.

[Councillors' Attitudes to Residential Design](#), summarises the views gleaned from a national survey of local councillors in England on their approach to the design of new residential development. Understanding the role of local politicians in regards to the design of new housing development — their aspirations, motivations, modes of operation and frustrations — was the purpose of this national survey. This research begs the question: how are our local politicians playing their part in helping to deliver better design? [A Design Audit for England](#) offers a systematic approach to assessing the design quality of the external residential environment. The audit has assessed 142 large-scale developments across England and provides enough data for comparisons to be made between regions and different approaches to the delivery of new housing.

New research will be available in 2020 that seeks to understand the impact of the built environment on people's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each project is designed to fill an identified gap in knowledge that will support the organisation's other 'Information' and 'Persuasion' activities.

4.2. Information initiatives

Place Alliance initiatives are always centred on building partnerships to deliver robust evidence-based reports. These reports are utilised to inform policy through direct campaigns, best practice advocacy, and outreach to promote place quality.

Place Alliance's 'Information initiatives' support this by encompassing the preparation and publication of documents and web-tools which aim to diffuse research to an audience of practitioners, local authorities, governmental committees and key players. The forms the information initiatives pursued take are designed to have different purposes and encompass a diversity of approaches, from involving its network supporters in nominating place exemplars, to building a broader collaborative platform, to the simple synthesis of knowledge. Key target audiences are development professionals, local authorities, and public servants representing the interests of local communities.

Place Alliance's involvement with the production of publications and tools began in July 2015 with [Place Exemplars](#), a document used as a campaigning tool that had been prepared in advance of a meeting with the then-Minister of State for Housing and Planning. Place Alliance asked its supporters to suggest examples of initiatives where local communities have been successfully incorporated into the planning, development and design of their areas, and where local powers had been used to positively shape the places existing or springing up in their localities.

This was followed by the development and release of a collaborative online tool that amasses evidence-connecting aspects of place quality and place value, the '[Place Value Wiki](#)'. This baseline of knowledge searched 13,700 relevant records to publish *Place Value and The Ladder of Place Quality*, a practical guide useful for built environment decision-makers, arguing that an intelligent approach to public policy should have a definite place quality dimension at its heart.

As well as its central work, the Place Alliance supports working groups, which develop initiatives/actions and lead BIG MEETS in order to broadcast their work to a wider audience. These working groups provide different points of reference for the whole network that are grouped around different themes, notably Arts and place, Education and place, Health and place, and Urban rooms. Some of the works developed and supported through the working groups include the [Place Manifesto and Health and Place Manifesto](#).

By reaching out to organisations and individuals in local areas across England, Place Alliance provides significant support to non-profit bodies across the country. In addition to representing these affiliated working groups, it enables the network to

develop actions, projects and initiatives that relate to its supporters' areas of interests. It does so by acting in a support role; at no point does it take control or ownership of any of these groups but instead remains in an enabling role.

Place Alliance has also delivered a series of Urban Design Summer Schools, helping to:

- Increase design skills in the public sector for individuals with no formal design background
- Promote urban design across the public sector.

The next Urban Design Summer School will be organised in conjunction with Urban Design London. It involves the preparation of a two to three-day intensive programme focusing on types of skills perceived as lacking among professionals in the public sector.

4.3. Persuasion initiatives

Place Alliance's remit is to promote design quality, and therefore, the type of campaigning activities plays a significant role in this. This includes leading or taking part in campaigns to spread the notion of design quality among the government and industry. The campaigns aim to advocate independently in order to influence legislation and policy. Partnerships with other organisations are created and nurtured from within the Place Alliance network of supporters to spread the reach of its campaigning themes across government (national and local) as a unified, independent voice to promote the value of design quality.

The primary aim of this campaigning activity focuses on ensuring that government incorporates design quality more prominently into their processes and decisions. This first started by engaging with the 2015-16 Parliamentary Select Committee on National Policy for the Built Environment – [Building Better Places](#), with Professor Matthew Carmona (UCL) represented Place Alliance and served as the Committee's Specialist Adviser. A second campaign focused on the Housing and Planning Bill, which introduced the 'Permission in Principle' PIP. The Campaign suggested combining the designation of PiP with the production of a simple 'Coordinating code.' This Coordinating Code approach was featured by the Federation of Master Builders in their report *Small is Beautiful* and in the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission's report [Living with Beauty](#).

This was followed by a campaign that brought together five organisations led by the Place Alliance to call for the ‘Government to get serious on design’ when reviewing the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The resulting changes to the NPPF included a clear statement that “The creation of high-quality buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development processes should achieve.” Most recently, the Place Alliance has led five other organisations to campaign for the establishment of a Design Quality Unit for England, publishing the pamphlet [Delivering Urban Quality, Time to Get Serious](#), and disseminating it to an audience of 450 across industry and government.

Apart from being directly involved in publishing evidence and campaigning based on that evidence, Place Alliance regularly brings together a diverse range of industry and non-industry, professional and non-professional actors in BIG MEET events that are open to all. By these means, Place Alliance supports its bottom-up grassroots model to expand its reach and influence at minimal cost. The BIG MEETS help to expand the Place Alliance’s reach nationally and provides a platform to discuss and inform the public conversation around place quality in different localities. Each BIG MEET typically attracts around 150 delegates to focus on a different aspect of the place quality agenda. To move beyond a London-centric understanding of place quality in England, three Regional BIG MEETS have also been conducted, in the South West, North, and West Midlands.

5. Relationship with formal (regulatory) tools

Whilst the Place Alliance is independent of government, industry or any narrow interest bodies, it does its utmost to work with all. At its heart is a network and all are welcome to join as supporters (at no cost) and to take part in its management and direction. It exclusively uses informal tools, having no powers of its own, but campaigns to achieve positive changes to the formal design governance apparatus of the state. Its only significant asset is the authority of its voice delivered through an informed, evidence-based approach to all of its work and undertakings.

6. Allied financial mechanisms

Place Alliance is an independent not-for-profit initiative of UCL. It operates on a tight budget and relies on the generosity of its supporters who donate their time and efforts to help with the organization’s work and undertakings. It receives a limited

income to help support its research activities, notably to conduct the housing design audit and its research on design review.

7. Challenges and equalities issues

The Place Alliance is hosted by University College London (UCL) and is chaired by Professor Matthew Carmona, but its strategic direction is set and determined by a Core Supporters Group, which is also open for anyone to join. All its events are open, free and participative and anyone is free to suggest and indeed set up a relevant Working Group to steer key themes of interest. A very loose management framework is available for all to see on its website and all outputs, results, activities and support is published there in an open and transparent manner. Being hosted by a university, Place Alliance is seen as a neutral space without any political or commercial allegiances.

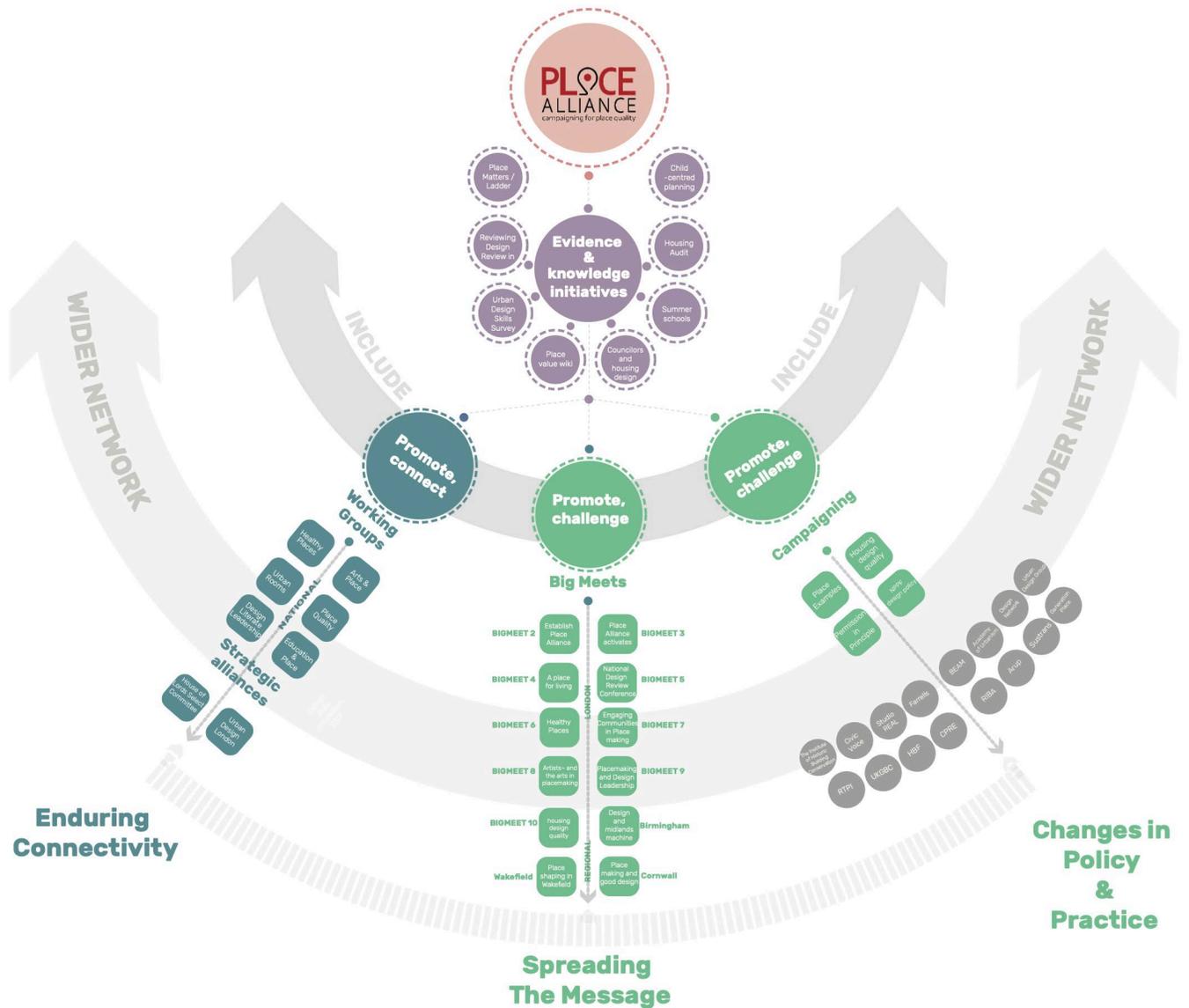
Inevitably its work is limited by the funding it receives (largely from the university) and by the fact that it relies entirely on influencing others to have any impact, given that it has no powers or formal authority itself.

8. Key innovations, successes and impacts

The Place Alliance initiative emerged from research at UCL into the value of informal tools of urban design governance. It is difficult to be precise about the impact of the Place Alliance as many are diffuse and likely to be long-term in their influence. In essence, Place Alliance has:

- Developed and cultivated a large and active network that is collectively making the case for place quality both nationally and locally and which gives numerous organisations and individuals the confidence to take these critical issues seriously
- Filled an evidence gap by building an evidence base that not only demonstrates and highlights the value of place quality, but uncovers key urban design governance issues – skills, political commitment, design review – that need to be addressed nationally, and underpins guidance for practitioners to use
- Influenced national policy and helped to re-ignite a national conversation on design quality that is now informing debates at the highest level, including in reformed national planning policy on design

- Encouraged further discussion around place quality by bringing thousands of policy makers, practitioners, community representatives, activists and others together, inspiring them, and enabling them to renew their interest in design / place quality with vigour and purpose
- Given licence to participate and collaborate through its working groups, alliances around key initiatives and BIG MEETS. All of these approaches empower individuals and organisations to come together and debate and collaborate around key concerns relating to the design of the built environment
- Helped to build capacity in the sector through its summer schools and other events, whilst work by the Place Alliance directly led to the investment by the Government in urban design skills for local authorities through the influence of its design skills work on resources made available through the Planning Delivery Fund.



In England, Place Alliance has brought a new bottom-up and collaborative approach – completely open and inclusive – to the leadership of urban design governance. The neutral space it provides and its evidence-based approach enables organisations and individuals to influence one another and the place quality agenda at large. The conversation has engaged many, from small community groups to large professional institutes. This networked approach to design governance represents a new paradigm that is particularly suited to the fragmented design governance landscape of England in the post-CABE era ([CABE](#) being the former government advisor on design, disbanded in 2011).

Place Alliance acts as a knowledge broker, helping to translate and amplify the messages arising from its research, collaborations and communications activities, enabling them to reach policy makers, practitioners and other audiences. In doing so, Place Alliance has helped keep place quality on the national agenda at a time of austerity and disengagement across the country, and remains significantly implicated in the national revival in interest in this field since 2018. Their being awarded the Sir Peter Hall Award for Wider Engagement by the Royal Town Planning Institute in 2016, and receiving the accolade from the Association of European Schools of Planning for Best Published Paper for the underpinning research, both confirm the importance of its work.

9. Key lessons and transferability

While so far its activities have been limited to England, it is hoped that the Place Alliance could provide a valuable model for others to emulate, particularly in the Global South. In part, this is because it represents a model that is able to operate with virtually no resources and which instead works by harnessing and enabling a network of willing and enthusiastic supporters. For the Place Alliance, the key challenge will be to sustain this into the future, but evidence from its first five years has demonstrated that this is a model that appears to be very effective indeed.

Key lessons include:

- Influencing debate and practice nationally does not need to be resource heavy, but can harness the boundless enthusiasm of the many who see the value of place quality
- Having universities take a leading role puts a trusted and impartial player in the driving seat and ensures the initiative is led through evidence and knowledge rather than through dogma and politics
- The built environment is often a fragmented field of knowledge and practice, meaning that often design and place quality can be dismissed as irrelevant by those who do not understand the critical place value that they can add. In England, Place Alliance has helped to fill a leadership gap.
- It has been critical to build a network that connects into and seems relevant to those who are responsible for delivering top-down solutions, as well as to those for whom empowering bottom-up solutions is the right way. There is a need to empower both.

KEY ONLINE RESOURCES

<http://placealliance.org.uk>

Place Alliance @ five, initiatives and impact, http://placealliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/5-Years-Impact-Report-PA-Final_April-2020_small.pdf

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United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

P.O. Box 30030 00100 Nairobi GPO KENYA
www.unhabitat.org

URBAN MAESTRO

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