What on earth is a perimeter block?

A perimeter block is a basic, but critical building component of settlement design.

The origins of perimeter blocks can be traced back to fortifications where the external facing walls were ‘harder’ or more secure than the ‘softer’ and more private parts of the community that sat within a secured inner core.

There are various types of perimeter blocks yet good perimeter blocks have the same characteristics: **public fronts** that form a strong outward (or public facing) edge and **private backs**.

It is regarded good practice to create secure inner cores comprising of communal gardens or a series of interlocking private gardens.

Note: all images unless otherwise stated sourced from Google Maps.
The need for fronts and backs

This means that all buildings need two faces: a *front* onto public space, for entrances and the most public activities, and a *back* where the most private activities can go. This gives users the chance to do whatever they like in their private space, *including* the right to make rubbish and clutter, without compromising the publicness of public space.

Because private activities out of doors are particularly vulnerable to overlooking, they have to be screened by solid barriers. If they are at the front, adjoining public space, these barriers have a negative, deadening effect, destroying the public character. *Most* of the private outdoor space must therefore be at the back.

**Perimeter block development**

Applied consistently, the front/back distinction - with private open space at the back, and public open space at the front - leads to a type of layout we call *perimeter block development*.
Examples of perimeter blocks

Whilst there are different ways of creating a perimeter block depending on the location and type of development, the basic principles remain the same (remember: public fronts and private backs).

Below: An example of a Victorian perimeter block – note that private gardens are interlocking and generally have no interface with the public realm. Source: Google Maps

Below: An example of broken perimeter blocks where back gardens ‘front onto’ the public realm. The example below is typical of Radburn style planning where efforts were made to separate pedestrians and vehicles. Radburn developments are vulnerable to crime and anti-social behaviour with often an excess of space with no clear public or private function – or sense of ownership. Source: Google Maps
Fragmented or broken perimeter blocks are easy to spot by the lack of building fronts facing onto the street. Here the **public realm lacks surveillance opportunity** and back gardens are vulnerable to intrusion. Note the piece of grass to the left side of the pavement. Is it public or private? What function does it serve? Source: Google Maps

Try and imagine what it might be like to walk down this street after dark. If you tripped and fell over do you think anyone from the neighbouring homes would notice?

Below: An **urban perimeter block** where the public facing parts of buildings are orientated to face the street and where the more private elements are located within the block. These private elements are typically communal gardens, car parks or servicing areas. Source: Google Maps
Below: A broken perimeter block that creates a poor relationship with the adjacent area of open space.

If site constraints meant that it is impossible to create a full perimeter block, how might you improve the interface between the back of this block and the open space? Could you sketch an alternative on the photograph below? Source: Google Maps
In the 1990s, **New Urbanism** arrived in England. Emphasising traditional street scenes, efforts were made to remove parked cars from the street.

Pioneered in Poundbury, this required a new approach to perimeter block design that enabled cars to be placed within the centre of blocks.

To enable this to happen, the centre of the blocks needed to be ‘cracked open’ enabling cars to get in and out; whilst also allowing space for car parking within the centre of the blocks.

Critically, for this to work successfully these types of ‘open’ perimeter blocks need to appear as semi-private spaces with **strong levels of surveillance opportunity** and house types that are designed to be accessed from the rear.

Without these design features, you end up with ‘Poundbury on the cheap’ style blocks that are unattractive, poorly overlooked spaces and where it is impractical to park at the rear to then simply have to walk back round to the front door.

*Above: A typical Poundbury block. Note the strong levels of surveillance opportunity, changes in surface material and convenient rear access into homes. Source: CG Fry and Son.*

[http://www.cgfry.co.uk/public/images/Poundbury/Poundbury%203-3-4Site.jpg](http://www.cgfry.co.uk/public/images/Poundbury/Poundbury%203-3-4Site.jpg)
Below: Poundbury blocks include more than just parking. They are well overlooked with homes placed within these spaces. Critically, these homes are not just flat over garage house styles but more traditionally designed homes with *habitable rooms at the ground floor* – enabling natural surveillance at street level. Source: Google Maps

Below: An internal courtyard space within a typical Poundbury block. Source: Google Maps
Poundbury style blocks have been copied elsewhere – some more successfully than others.

Less successful examples such as those below are constructed more cheaply, with fences instead of walls, no lighting, poor levels of surveillance and cheaper hard and soft landscape specifications.
Above: Limited surveillance opportunity and an overall lack of place quality.

Above: A courtyard with parking – note the high quality hard surfacing, lighting and surveillance opportunity. Smaller courtyards limited to no more than around five homes tend to work best as this way those using the courtyard will tend to recognise those who should (and should not be) in the courtyard. Images: author’s own.

However, it is not just enough to create outward facing perimeter blocks – the corners of the blocks need careful attention.
To achieve a positive relationship with the street, habitable buildings should be placed on corners with windows serving habitable rooms addressing the streets either side. Therefore, **garages are never a good way to turn a corner.**

Likewise, **blank side elevations** or side elevations with just a window to a bathroom or downstairs WC will not create a good sense of spatial definition – or a good relationship with the street.
Style wise, this sweater inspired house might not be your cup of tea, but it does define the corner of this block well by virtue of its shape and position, combined with windows to habitable rooms on both sides of the house.

Below you will see a few more examples of how to turn corners well...
So, by creating strong perimeter blocks a positive relationship with the street (or public realm) can be achieved.

**Are perimeter blocks justified under the NPPF?**

Yes, see paragraph 58 which states,

“create safe and accessible environments where crime and disorder, and the fear of crime, do not undermine quality of life or community cohesion; and...are visually attractive as a result of good architecture”.

Paragraph 24 of Planning Practice Guidance 58 also states,

“In general urban block layouts provide an efficient template with building fronts and entrances to public spaces and their more private backs to private spaces. Such layouts minimise the creation of unsupervised and unsafe public spaces and unsafe access routes. However building frontages do not have to be continuous or flat. Breaks and features particularly where they emphasise entrances, can be successfully incorporated.”
A quick recap:

*Which do you think creates a better relationship with the street?*

Option A: Back gardens onto the street

Option B: Front doors onto the street

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