

2.4 What shapes the character of places?

In this section you will learn about the different factors that help to shape the character of places and the communities that occupy them; both local influences and relationships with other places.

Places are unique

As we have learnt earlier in the chapter, our understanding of the world is closely tied to our appreciation of different places (2.2 and 2.3), and based on our direct experiences or their depictions in the media, we can describe what makes places unique. The fact that every place is unique may inform decisions about how each one might be developed or redeveloped. Landscape architects, who design public spaces and landmarks for clients like councils, national parks and multinational organisations, are taught to think about the *genius loci* of a place. This means that they should consider a place's key characteristics and its context – where it is located.

Factors that contribute to the character of places

Different aspects of local, regional, national and international geography influence the character of places.

Physical geography shapes places

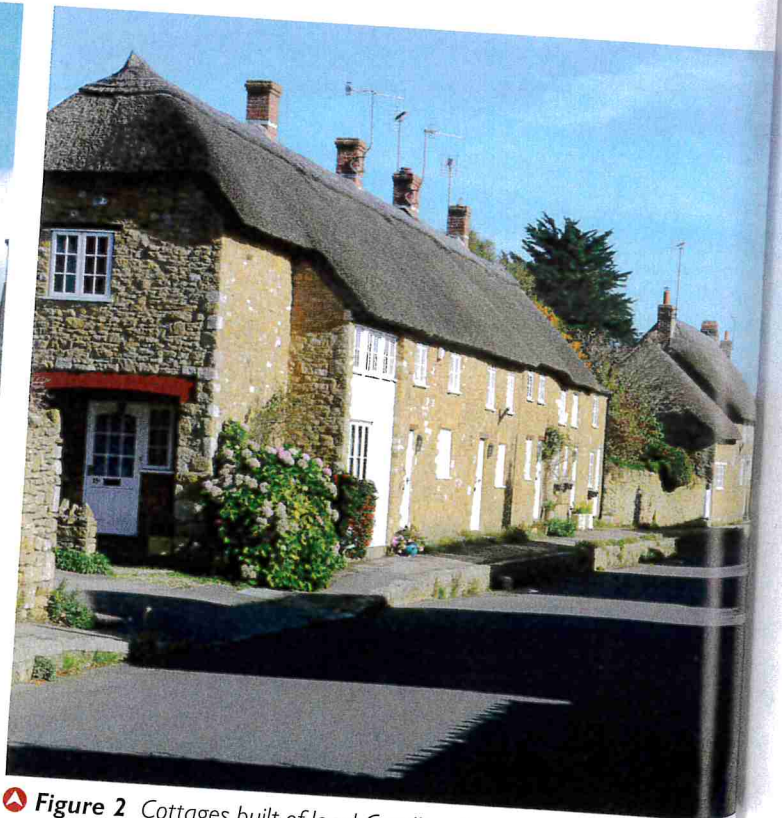
Contrast Aberdeen, the 'Granite City' (Figure 1), with the village of Abbotsbury in Dorset (Figure 2). The local stone used to build houses in a place can give the built environment a particular colour and contributes to its character.

Think about

What are the key characteristics of the place where you live? How might they influence your designs for a local park or another public space? What sort of local groups and other organisations might like to have their say in what you plan to develop?

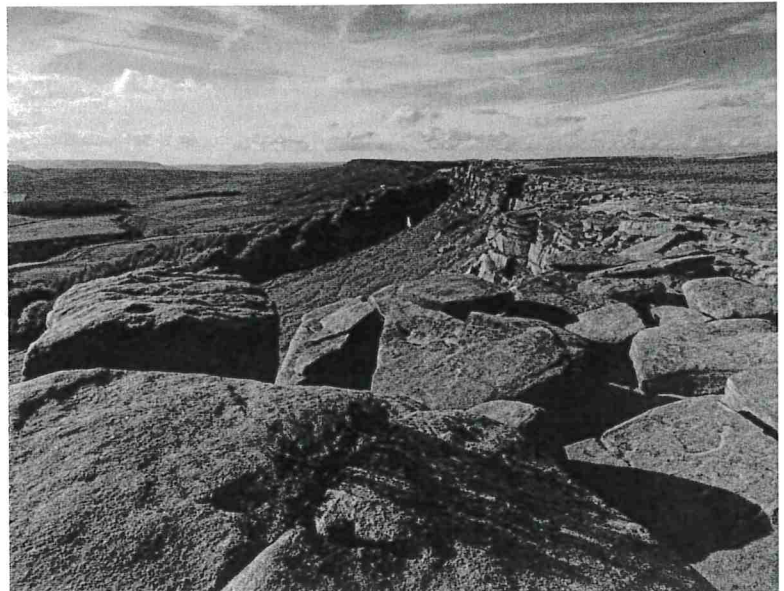


▲ Figure 1 Granite-built tenement flats in Aberdeen



▲ Figure 2 Cottages built of local Corallian limestone in Abbotsbury, Dorset

Likewise, the rock that remains underground shapes a place, affecting its topography – the shape and height of the land. You might hear somebody describe a county according to its topography. A generalisation like ‘Derbyshire is rugged, Dorset is quaint’ could be inspired by comparing the architectural style of these places – Dorset is peppered with charming thatched homes (Figure 2), whereas housing in the Peak District is termed ‘robust and simple’, even ‘plain’ by the Peak District National Park Authority. However, this stark comparison of counties is more likely to be inspired by the contrast between the gentle rolling countryside of Dorset and the drama of areas such as the Dark Peak region of Derbyshire, named after the dark-coloured bedrock of Millstone Grit (Figure 3). The local geology influences not only the look but also the physical experience of travelling around a place as well as many other aspects of a place including drainage, soil fertility and land use.



▲ **Figure 3** Stanage Edge stands above the village of Hathersage in Derbyshire

Demographic and economic characteristics also shape places

Dialects, ducks and data

Ay up mi duck? is a common greeting in Derbyshire, meaning ‘Hello, what’s up friend?’. The phrase was given international kudos when actress Angelina Jolie addressed a fellow actor who was from Derby in such a way at an award ceremony in Hollywood.

Accents and local **dialects** vary greatly within the UK. These contribute to our understanding of residents and contribute to a sense of place. However, they may also prompt the stereotyping of local people, hiding the diversity within the population of a county, city, town or village.

Census data about a population, broken down by age, employment status, education and home ownership, may arguably tell you more about a local community than analysing the dialect (although social scientists draw on both qualitative and quantitative sources).

Figure 4 compares census data about the populations of two different places in Derbyshire. Hathersage and Eyam is a ward in the Peak District National Park in North Derbyshire. The ward of Sinfin is much more populous, being located on the outskirts of the city of Derby. Sinfin’s total population (15 128) is almost four times that of Hathersage and Eyam. But in what other ways do these two communities differ?

	Hathersage and Eyam	Sinfin	England
Health (%)			
Very good health	51.0	43.2	47.2
Good health	33.2	34.8	34.2
Not good: day-to-day activities limited a lot	6.4	9.5	8.3
Employment status: aged 16–44 (%)			
Employed full-time	35.1	34.2	38.6
Unemployed	2.2	7.5	4.4
Education of people aged 16 and over (%)			
With five or more GCSEs grade A–C	13.6	15.6	15.2
With no formal qualifications	14.5	31.7	22.5
Homeownership (%)			
All households who owned their own accommodation outright	46.2	18.7	30.6
All households who owned their own accommodation with a mortgage or loan	28.6	26.2	32.8
Ethnicity (%)			
White	98.6	71.0	86.0
Mixed or multiple ethnicity	0.8	5.9	2.2
Asian or Asian British	0.5	14.9	7.5
Black or Black British	0	6.4	3.3
Other	0.1	1.8	1.0
Number of households	1663	5760	22 063 368

▲ **Figure 4** Comparison of demographic make-up of Hathersage and Eyam ward with Sinfin ward (Census 2011)