a) Nodal neighbourhood

b) Street neighbourhood

c) Neighbourhood adjacent to main road

d) Waterfront neighbourhood

f) Neighbourhood across a slope

e) Neighbourhood at a motorway

g) Town centre with railway station surrounded by neighbourhood clusters

h) Town centre with outlying neighbourhood clusters

Birmingham urban design strategy: neighbourhood identities

The heritage of the Jewellery Quarter is being used to underpin proposals to enhance this urban village (source: EDAW)

Often the planning system does not help. To illustrate, if we take a typical large site, land uses may include housing, a primary school, shops, offices and some industry. Planning generally zones these uses and gives them relatively fixed boundaries before any serious design work is undertaken. On occasion, sites are carved into development parcels around a rudimentary road system without a clear urban design structure in place. At this stage, it is not unknown for densities to be decided upon, as well as other fixed requirements - open space provision, for example. This approach frequently involves routing the main road round the site rather than across it and locating the traffic generating uses such as retail and employment areas close to entrance junctions and along the main road. The road is used as a boundary to segregate uses. Such attempts to create a sense of place around a focal point often fail because the very uses that generate activity are on the edge of the site or beyond, in a nearby business park or out-of-town centre, and tend to be internalised in 'big boxes'.

This tendency can be reversed by promoting diversity in terms of:
•   Development forms;
•   Land use;
•   Density;
•   Tenure;
•   Market segments.

3.2.1 THE NEIGHBOURHOOD UNIT

Build walkable neighbourhoods
Mixed use development can best be promoted by using the distance most people will walk to daily facilities, the corner shop or the bus stop as a starting point.

The neighbourhood unit can provide a useful organising device - but only when it is overlaid on an integrated movement framework and conceived as a piece of town or city whose activities and forms overlap. This is to move away from large-scale projects envisaged or described as neighbourhoods, but designed as disconnected enclaves. It is also to move away from estates and layouts - terms which in themselves serve to emphasise single use and segregation.

A widely used benchmark is for mixed development neighbourhoods to cover a 400m radius, equating to about five minutes walk. This translates into 50 hectares.

3.2.2 CHARACTER AREAS

A patchwork of different activities
In many towns and cities, there is scope for strengthening existing neighbourhoods where identity is based on a particular activity or mix, (a market place or college campus for example), or devising new areas of special character. Such 'character areas' can reinforce local identity and serve as a marketing tool to raise the profile of a particular place, as in the case of Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter. These may relate to predominant uses, focal buildings, historic associations or ethnic composition, such as a Chinatown.