

## The urban design framework

Urban design was conceived as having a key role in providing the community with a sense of place and a sustainable infrastructure as well as establishing a physical framework within which private development could be located. The design of the urban framework was premised on the notion of 'working with the landscape'. It conceived the Cambridgeshire Fenland landscape as a dynamic and continually evolving form. Once wet lands and then tamed in the 18th century by ditches and dykes to allow agricultural uses, the Fenland landscape now lies increasingly redundant due to the uncompetitive nature of British agriculture (DEFRA, 2002). So, what next? How could the landscape evolve to accept new uses? The concept for the design of the infrastructure of ECO-town identified the deep underlying two- and three-dimensional patterns, and textures both in the Fenland landscape and in the site itself and used them to provide the formal structuring devices for the development frame-work (Figure 14.4).

Hence the urban framework was characterised by patchworks, watercourses, horizontal planes and hedges. Distinctive existing elements would be, wherever possible, used, enhanced or extrapolated to form the visual character and infrastructure (such as roads, plot divisions, parks, networks of watercourses) for the development. Thus the infrastructure both created the *genius loci* and prepared the ground for future building. This approach conceived the urban environment as being extrapolated from the existing site conditions as a kind of contextual metamorphosis. This notion of metamorphosis meant that the infrastructure could be precise and flexible, anticipatory and indeterminate, at the same time. Through urban management the development could grow and adjust according to shifting local, regional and global conditions. Hence the development would not progress to a predetermined vision or state but could evolve within the loose envelope of the urban design constraints. Thus the infrastructure created a 'directed field' by setting the technical and infrastructure limitations in which different architects and designers could contribute without aesthetic constraint. Such an approach might be contrasted to the predetermined 'architectural vision' approach of the New Urbanists (the generic 'traditional' English village).<sup>11</sup> Whilst the New Urbanist approach promotes the reinstatement of a largely defunct historical urban paradigm, this alternative approach suggested a development model that promoted the transformation of the countryside into something new and

Figure 14.4  
ECO-town: the new infrastructure layout extrapolates the existing landscape morphology.



relevant through employing sustainable rather than stylistic criteria.

### **The framework development over time**

The ECO-town development framework projected, following the land use demand forecasts generated by the Lowry model (Lowry, 1964),<sup>12</sup> that development would be realised in a series of three notional phases, of varying sizes and programmes, with a fourth contiguous phase relating to the country park which