

Urban redevelopment culture in England since 1997

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It is possible to trace a shift over the last seven years in the nature of urban redevelopment culture in England. Gradually, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of design in regeneration, and of the need for development to be sustainable. Through a series of milestone events, traced below, an agenda that places good design at the heart of creating successful communities has been promoted. There are huge challenges ahead in translating this new agenda into results on the ground, but these events give reason to be optimistic that design led regeneration can take hold and deliver an enduring renaissance in England's towns and cities.

Milestone 1 - the Urban Task Force

The election in 1997 of a Labour government heralded a significant moment in the recent history of urban redevelopment culture in England. The previous Conservative administration, focusing largely on the economic aspects of regeneration, had had some success in addressing the need for urban renewal. For example, the Enterprise Zone initiative, by offering developers a fast track planning system and financial incentives, had transformed the unpopular Docklands area of London into a major financial and commercial centre. However, Enterprise

Zones in other areas, such as in Liverpool, failed to take hold.

The Labour government has sought to develop a holistic approach to regeneration, attempting to bring together the social and environmental, as well as economic, aspects of urban redevelopment. The Labour approach has also been characterised, as with other aspects of the Government's programme, by a desire to establish partnerships of public and private sector bodies to work together to bring about change. This approach is evident in the establishment of the 'Urban Task Force' formed about a year after the 1997 election. The Task Force comprised a panel of top experts from the public and private sectors, representing practitioners and academics from across a range of fields involved in urban regeneration. The panel was chaired by the architect Richard Rogers, whose views on urban renaissance had been influential in Labour Party circles for a number of years.

The Task Force was an early demonstration of the Government's desire to tackle urban regeneration in a new way. It was charged with recommending "practical solutions to bring people back into our cities, towns and urban neighbourhoods." It explicitly sought to establish a "new vision for urban regeneration" based on the principles of "design excellence, social well being and environmental responsibility."¹ Over the course of a year, the Task Force collected evidence from a range of interested parties, and conducted a series of overseas fact finding visits to the Netherlands, Spain, Germany and the USA.

In 1999, the Task Force published its findings in a report entitled "Towards an Urban Renaissance". The report was a detailed analysis of the causes of urban decline, and the future challenges likely to

be faced by urban areas. It contained 105 recommendations for change. The underlying view of the state of urban redevelopment in England was stark; Richard Rogers stated that “In the quality of our urban design and strategic planning, we are probably 20 years behind places like Amsterdam and Barcelona”. The proposed solution, at its simplest level, was also clearly put: “regeneration has to be design-led”.²

Of the many conclusions and proposals set out in the report, a number stand out as being key.

The Sustainable City

The report pinpointed a number of key drivers of urban decline. These included the post-industrial legacy of obsolete buildings and poorly maintained public space; an associated flight to the suburbs; the over-dominance of the needs of cars in the town planning of the post-war era; increased car use in general; and a planning system which had increasingly submitted to the pressure for out of town development. The solutions proposed, such as emphasising urban design frameworks and spatial master-planning, and committing more public sector transport expenditure to prioritising walking, cycling and public transport, were evidence of an increased concern in Government and built environment circles with achieving the “most sustainable urban form”. The report advanced the view that compact urban development, well-served by public transport and with levels of residential density high enough to sustain local services, was the model most likely to reverse urban decline.

Making Towns and Cities Work

The quality of management and maintenance was identified as a crucial factor in the success or otherwise of urban

areas. Some recommendations made applied to all areas of the country, such as giving local authorities a strategic role to ensure management of the whole urban environment, while others were targeted at specific areas.

The report envisaged new bodies known as Urban Regeneration Companies, made up of a partnership which could include local authorities, development companies and others, as coordinating or delivering area regeneration projects.

The importance of skills, and how they are applied, was identified as a key to urban management and regeneration. Dealing with the new challenges was seen as requiring a breaking down of traditional barriers between professional groups and more openness to learning from each other.

Making the Most of our Urban Assets

The context in which the report was written was one of increasing pressure particularly because of growing housing demand, for development on greenfield (i.e. previously undeveloped) sites. The report promoted the redevelopment of brownfield (i.e. previously developed) land as a means both of reviving urban areas and sparing excessive building on greenfield areas, and identified weaknesses in the planning system which hindered the addressing of these problems. These included a tendency to be reactive and slow, and a failure to acknowledge the special problems associated with redeveloping an urban site. Recommendations were made to streamline the planning system.

Management of the land supply was identified as another key issue and the report recommended a sequential approach to the release of land and buildings for housing, already something that had been

introduced, with considerable success, by the previous Conservative administration with regard to retail developments.

Making the Investment and Sustaining the Renaissance

These sections presented practical proposals for putting the report's recommendations into action, and a vision of how urban renaissance could be measured and sustained. It noted that achieving an urban renaissance could only happen if the private sector were brought along too (this reflected the "mixed economy" realpolitik of the Labour administration which contrasted with earlier Labour administrations of the 1960s and 1970s). It suggested a series of investment and tax measures to encourage this. The main principle to emerge was that of making public funds work harder to leverage in private investment.

The Government Response - The Urban White Paper

The Government has responded to the Task Force report over a number of years through various initiatives, and its response is to some extent ongoing. The first formal response, however, was made through *The Urban White Paper*, published in 2000, part of which set out the Government's proposed response to each of the Task Force's recommendations. Some have been more fully taken up than others; perhaps one of the most important to be enthusiastically endorsed by Government has been the setting up of Urban Regeneration Companies (URCs).

There are 15 URCs to date in England, bringing together local authorities, local employers, amenity groups, community representatives, Regional Development Agencies³ and English Partnerships⁴ to

coordinate investment plans from the public and private sectors and attract new investment. Many have already proved successful in ensuring that good design is an intrinsic part of this process. The New East Manchester URC, for example, is currently promoting a scheme for the economically deprived east side of Manchester, designed by Alsop Architects, which is imaginative and daring.

Milestone 2 - the establishment of CAFE

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CAFE) was set up in 1999 with the overarching aim of championing the role of good architecture and urban design in improving everyone's quality of life. In the context of urban regeneration, CAFE aims to ensure that good design is an underlying principle in redevelopment schemes. CAFE works in a variety of fields, such as education, skills and public space, to achieve its aims.

CAFE is a non-departmental public body, funded by the Government but with a degree of independence. It is funded through two Government departments — the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which has responsibility for architectural policy, and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which has responsibility for the planning system, housing, regeneration, and regional policy. This dual sponsorship is emblematic of the fact that CAFE brings together the fields of architecture, urban design and planning which have often operated in isolation from each other, and in a culture of mutual suspicion.

From a starting point of around 15 staff, CAFE has expanded over five years to employ around 80 people with a budget of approximately €16 million. The work of the staff is supported by a 'family' of around 200 leading professionals — architects, urban

designers, developers, planners — who contribute to CABA’s work by, for example, serving on its Design Review Panel, which offers comments on the design of significant schemes. A board of 16 leading professionals and practitioners has overall responsibility for the work of CABA.

CABA has grown in influence since its inception, but there are significant limits to its reach. It remains a small organisation with no regional offices. Resource constraints mean that only the most significant schemes can be subject to design review. And with no formal planning powers of its own, CABA’s importance will continue to be derived from influencing those making the decisions. Having said this, CABA’s views are increasingly an important consideration for many local authorities in making decisions on planning applications. The degree of CABA’s influence varies, but many metropolitan local authorities in particular actively seek CABA’s guidance as a means of trying to secure well-designed development (as, increasingly, do many architects and developers).

Milestone 3 - The Sustainable Communities Plan

While demographic trends are pointing to a need for some 3.8 million extra homes in the UK over a 25-year period, this masks significant disparities in demand, mainly between areas in northern and southern England.⁵ The Government’s *Sustainable Communities Plan*, published in 2003, was a response to this trend.

As the name suggests, the overarching concern of the Sustainable Communities Plan is with sustainable development. The classic Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable development— “development that meets the needs of the present without

compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” — deals with sustainability in terms of time.⁶ The definitions outlined in *The Sustainable Communities Plan* can be seen as an attempt to define it in terms of place, and many of them feature explicit mention of design issues. Some of the key characteristics of sustainable communities, as identified in the plan, are:

- A flourishing local economy to provide jobs and wealth
- A safe and healthy local environment with well-designed public and green space
- Sufficient size, scale and density, and the right layout to support basic amenities in the neighbourhood and minimise use of resources (including land)
- Good public transport and other transport infrastructure
- A “sense of place”⁷

The main part of the plan aims to address the contrasting phenomena of high demand for housing outstripping supply in the south of England, and low demand leading to failing communities in some former industrial areas of the north of England. In the south, economic prosperity and growth in the number of households has led to increased demand for housing. This has not been matched by an increase in the supply of housing. Partly as a result, house prices have experienced huge growth in recent years, pushing the purchase of a home beyond the reach of many. This particularly affects lower paid workers in the public sector, including workers in “key” services such as health and education. The challenge is therefore to provide more

homes to better balance supply with demand, and provide particular help for these key workers.

At the same time, the design quality of the volume housebuilder product has generally been poor over the last few decades. The plan acknowledges that increased housing supply needs to be accompanied by better-designed housing.

The plan aims to tackle these problems through a number of measures. It identifies four housing 'growth areas', the most substantial being in the Thames Gateway, where the effort to provide more homes will be concentrated. This will involve cooperation between the Government, local authorities and other stakeholders to provide new, well-designed communities. The Government has committed around €870 million over three years to facilitate site assembly and remediation of brownfield land, fund the delivery mechanisms that will provide the new communities, and to provide additional affordable housing and essential local infrastructure in these areas. The Government also allocated around €7,000 million over three years for the provision of affordable housing and housing for key workers.

In the north, house prices in general have also risen significantly, reflecting high general demand. However, this masks pockets of extremely low demand, and in some cases the widespread abandonment of properties. It is estimated that one million homes are affected by this problem, spread across 120 local authorities in the north and the midlands.⁸ The problem is not mainly to do with the quality of the dwellings; many are not in an inherently bad condition. The quality of the wider environment in these areas, however, is often generally poor, with badly maintained public spaces, poor access to services and facilities, and a

pervading sense of decline. This situation derives from economic and social deprivation, reflecting post-industrial unemployment, and a tendency to move to suburban or rural locations by those who could afford to do so.

The key Government response has been to set up nine "Pathfinder" areas covering about half the homes affected by low demand and abandonment. The approach aims to bring together partnerships of local authorities and other key stakeholders to develop strategic plans for "housing market renewal".

The plans are envisaged as entailing sustained action to replace obsolete housing with modern sustainable housing, through demolition and new building or refurbishment. It is accepted that this will sometimes mean providing fewer homes than previously existed. The partnerships also have responsibility for ensuring the provision of other requirements of sustainable communities, such as good quality public services, in their areas. The Government created a €710 million fund for investment in the Pathfinder areas over three years, which provides the main funding to execute the Pathfinder plans.

CABE, together with the Commission for Integrated Transport, English Heritage, the Environment Agency and the Sustainable Development Commission, published a guidance document aimed at informing the work of the Pathfinders, based on the premise that good design was an important factor in securing successful solutions.⁹ The main points of advice were:

- Grasp the scale of the task and the opportunity — a truly successful approach will acknowledge that a wider area than that immediately

affected by the problem has to be involved in tackling it.

- Address heritage as an asset — much of the building stock in these areas is not a problem and, indeed, some buildings may be important to local history, pride and the townscape. Careful thought should be given before too much demolition takes place.
- Create places of distinction — urban design, well-designed public space and local distinctiveness should be emphasised as a means to avoid soulless “anywhere” places.
- Recognise the value of good design — this particularly highlighted the need for “design champions” i.e. influential individuals, for example senior local authority councillors, to drive through and sustain commitment to the role of design in the Pathfinder plans.
- Adopt policies to deliver high quality neighbourhoods — delivering each “Pathfinder” area vision requires the correct planning policies to be in place locally, requiring proper masterplanning and bringing housing management and urban design thought together.
- Sustainable development at the heart of thinking and action — creating compact, mixed use neighbourhoods is a key part of addressing low demand, since many of the areas in question are isolated with poor access to jobs and facilities.
- Get ready for the challenge — addressing these daunting problems

requires a wide range of skills. In many areas, there is a shortage of skilled people.

CABE has gone a step further in one of the areas affected by setting up a body, Design East.Lancashire, to work alongside the “Pathfinder” agency for that area in the north-west of England. Through this body, CABE will work with partners to coordinate a programme of activity, such as training courses for local authorities, to put design at the heart of housing market renewal.

Milestone 4- The Egan Review

As noted above, a shortage of appropriate skills is a key constraint on delivering successful and well-designed communities. A logical next step after the Government set out its *Sustainable Communities Plan*, and in some senses unfinished business from the Urban Task Force report, *The Egan Review* was commissioned to focus on what skills would be needed to deliver the vision contained in the Communities Plan.¹⁰

It represented an acknowledgement that, while there had developed a broad agreement among politicians, professionals and citizens about the goals of regeneration, the system seems generally ill-equipped to deliver those goals. The report identified a number of aspects of the problem, among the most important being:

- Emasculation of local authorities — the tendency of central government to take power away from local government over the last few decades has often contributed to poor local leadership.
- Lowest common denominator development — there has been little incentive for developers to deliver

anything other than the cheapest, easiest solutions.

- Single use development — the zoning of uses has tended to fragment areas and drain the life from town and city centres.
- Highways design - highways guidance is often in conflict with the goals of good urban design.

CABE would add the following problems to this list:

- A fragmentation of professions — where the design skills needed for the urban regeneration challenge exist, they are often not applied effectively to the problem.
- Public distrust — the record of government and built environment professions in remodelling towns and cities has inspired public distrust because many redevelopments of the 1950s and 1960s, for various reasons, have proved to be unsuccessful.
- Poor understanding of what design means
- Poor standard of private sector housebuilding — housebuilders have opted, generally, for the easiest option of ‘anywhere’ housing which is the same across the country.
- Timetables — public funding regimes often do not take sufficient account of the time needed for good design to be part of the process and can impose artificial deadlines on the delivery of projects.

The report identified people shortages in what it called the “core group” of built environment professionals concerned with sustainable communities work, such as planners and architects. Perhaps the key challenge identified by the report was a need to encourage more people to enter these core occupations, and to provide improved skills and updated information for people in other relevant groups.

Although originally focused on built environment professional skills, the report found that wider generic skills - such as those of leadership and communication - were also crucial. It identified a shortage of these generic skills among the core group. However, the report acknowledged that the wide range of occupations and their different training needs means it is difficult for existing providers to deliver the requisite skills.

The establishment of a National Centre for Sustainable Community Skills, to drive the skills agenda forward and maintain and enhance its profile, was therefore recommended. The overarching aim of the centre was described as ‘to develop world class skill sets amongst all those involved in planning, delivering and maintaining sustainable communities’. The Government announced in August 2004 that it would indeed set up a National Skills Centre, and the work to establish this is now under way.

Conclusion - Reasons to be optimistic

The establishment of the National Skills Centre is just one reason to be optimistic about the future of urban redevelopment culture in England. In the course of discussing the various milestones, it is inevitable that much mention has been made of the problems that attempts at urban regeneration face. However, there have already been promising success stories

which suggest that we should be optimistic about the future.

In the larger regional cities, which tend to have stronger political leadership, there has been much positive progress. Manchester is probably the best performer outside London in terms of pushing forward a regeneration agenda, which has paid attention to the importance of good design. Birmingham is another strong performer. The redevelopment of the Bullring shopping centre, once a byword for confusing and alienating town planning, has brought renewed activity and prosperity to this part of the city centre.

Part of such success is due to a pool of talented architects and urban designers in Britain. Some, such as Norman Foster, Richard Rogers and Will Alsop, are internationally famous and in demand. The challenge is to make sure these talents are applied where they are needed.

Housebuilding is perhaps the sector where greater application of design talent is most sorely required. But even here there are signs of change. Some volume housebuilders are showing interest in creating a better-designed product, and are recognising that there may be increased commercial value in doing so. In Gateshead in the north-east of England, for example, the housebuilder Wimpey has employed fashion designer Wayne Hemingway to help them create attractive and distinctive housing.

A key element in maintaining the momentum in favour of better-designed communities will be ensuring that local authorities catch up with their equivalents in, for example, Amsterdam and Barcelona in terms of the quality of their design thinking and planning.

A more proactive planning system is beginning to emerge. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004) puts the onus on local authorities to be more precise and proactive in their plan making. It also introduces the need for those applying for planning permission to produce design statements, which will improve the quality of dialogue concerning design, and raise its status in the planning process.

In the long term, perhaps the most important development is evidence of an increased public interest in design quality. CABI believes that lasting change will only come about when the public becomes more confident in demanding good design as a matter of course, and has launched a number of campaigns to raise awareness of the issues.

There is no doubt that over the last seven years there has been a concerted effort to identify the reasons for urban decline and promote new, integrated ways to address them. Government sponsored reports, and the initiatives and legislation which have followed, have unambiguously articulated a commitment to sustainable development and the importance of good design in urban regeneration. The various milestones identified in this article have contributed to the development of a common language for talking about successful regeneration which is finding increasingly wide acceptance. The next phase is to ensure that those who continue to shun the goals of design-led regeneration, such as many volume housebuilders, adopt this message, and that the appropriate skills to deliver those goals are in place.

Endnotes

¹ Urban Task Force: *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. Mission Statement. London, 1999.

² *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, introduction from Lord Rogers, Urban Task Force, London, 1999.

³ Regional Development Agencies are bodies set up by the Government to promote sustainable economic development in each of the regions of England (of which there are nine including London).

⁴ English Partnerships is the national regeneration agency.

⁵ Urban Task Force: *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. London, 1999.

⁶ Brundtland, Gro H. (Ed.): *Our Common Future. The World Commission on Environment and Development*. Oxford, 1987.

⁷ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) : *Sustainable Communities; Building for the Future*. London, 2003.

⁸ *ib.*

⁹ CABE: *Building Sustainable Communities: Actions for Housing Market Renewal*. London 2003 The Commission for Integrated Transport is the Government's adviser on the implementation of integrated transport policy; English Heritage is the Government's principal adviser on all aspects of the historic environment, its management and enjoyment; the Environment Agency is the public body charged with protecting and improving the environment in England and Wales; and the Sustainable Development Commission has a remit to advocate sustainable development across all sectors in the UK, review progress towards it, and build consensus on the actions needed if further progress is to be achieved.

¹⁰ Egan, John: *The Egan Review. Skills for Sustainable Communities* Royal Institute of British Architects Enterprises, London, 2004.