Why masterplan?
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In 'Urban Regeneration Toolbox', 2007

A masterplan is seen as essential for many big regeneration projects, and masterplanning has become a boom sector for consultants. But there are widely divergent views about what masterplans are for and what they should contain – and in fact it is not easy to find an agreed definition of what a masterplan is.   There are also those – some developers, for example - who don't believe that they are necessary in the first place.

But most people are able to see the potential of a properly funded and thorough masterplanning exercise to arrive at a shared vision about the future of a place when large scale urban regeneration is envisaged.   To succeed, such a vision needs to be shown to be practical and realistic.   It also needs to enthuse and inspire people - because without inspiration, all you will get is the sort of proposal, referred to as a 'consensus' but more accurately, a lowest common denominator - to which no one objects but in which no one believes.   This section offers some prompts to thinking about what needs to be done in order to have the best chance of achieving a 'practical vision'.

Masterplanning in the twenty-first century should not be thought of as a way of recapturing or recreating the coherence of historic places that are popular and successful - although this is sometimes referred to as an aspiration.   We no longer live in a world where a Haussmann or a Mussolini can lay down the grand axes of Paris or Rome, or even where a Llewellyn Davies can devise a more humane, but still grand, equivalent in Milton Keynes. The western world, at least, has become more complex in its structures, more mutable and contingent, and its citizens less inclined to be told what to do by governments (explaining, perhaps, the appeal of

projects in China and the Gulf to those masterplanning specialists, heirs of Haussmann, who still favour what has been referred to as 'Google Earth' masterplanning). Lack of control and lack of order in city planning, regretted by some, might just reflect some more general attributes of society that are in fact desirable.

But as is suggested by Spiro Kostof's dictum above, all planning, masterplanning included, should have a considered attitude to the balance between freedom and order. It seems likely that the desire for a shared vision derives in part from a feeling that mutability and contingency can all too easily collapse into visual and planning chaos.   It is also driven by the trend towards more collaborative ways of working – in particular, collaboration between the private and public sectors. And in the planning system, the emphasis has shifted to earlier, pre-application consultation. At the simplest level, a drawn masterplan can act as a lightning conductor for public opinion, eliciting responses that are unlikely to be provoked by written documents.

Client and consultant team

A mantra of CABE's work, based on a wealth of experience of projects good, bad and ugly, is that a good project results from a combination of a good client, a good brief and a good design team. This is just as true for masterplans as for building projects. To create a masterplan of substance, it is necessary to assemble a team of all the talents - the technical, creative and communication skills needed are unlikely to be found in one organisation, let alone one person. And the talents in the consultant team need to be matched by talent, and brief-writing and managerial skills, on the client side: without a level of in-house commitment and expertise, the enterprise will not flourish.

While it may be possible to develop frameworks and the like without design skills, masterplanning is a job for designers.   Design involves creativity and is not a logical process. The outputs can't

be fully defined in advance. For those managing designers, that is, managing a process with its own exigencies of time and budget, this may be difficult to come to terms with. Design management is a skill in its own right.

The masterplan – planning for architecture

A masterplan should demonstrate both the capacity of a place to be made to 'work', in the technical sense – allowing people to get around, and providing plausible and attractive opportunities for development - and also provide a vision of roughly what it might look like, and how it might become popular and successful.   A masterplan must specify some things, but leave other things open. Working out what comes into each category is one of the key tasks of the masterplanner.

A masterplan is more than a framework or a diagram. Masterplanning involves, at its heart, design: the devising of a three-dimensional spatial proposition about a piece of a town or city. A good masterplan suggests a simple urban structure of routes, spaces and urban blocks. But it is less than a development plan: it allows for change over time, and it allows certain freedoms in the ways that individual plots or blocks can be developed.   Decisions such as what size streets and squares should be, and how connections are made to the surroundings, are likely to persist over time, while buildings can come and go. Some of the results will be unforeseen - so it's best if the designers aren't control freaks.

Urban design, masterplanning and architecture are not, of course, independent disciplines – the whole influences the parts, but the parts affect the whole.   Most masterplans contain propositions about architecture, whether explicitly or implicitly. The layout of streets, open spaces, squares and so on will have an influence on where the background and foreground elements are, where there are

opportunities for important views and vistas, object buildings or 'icons'.

But can masterplans themselves be creative, or even 'iconic' - and if so, is this what we want? Do those who are to live in the outer reaches of the Thames Gateway want layouts or homes with the 'wow factor'?   Can a layout be inspiring in its own right, or is it a framework within which others can be inspired? These are posed as open questions, not rhetorical ones. Some question whether there is really a role for creative thinking in masterplanning at all; and there is also a lack of agreement about where such thinking might usefully be applied. There is a legitimate role for the client here, in deciding what sort of, and how much, creativity they are asking for from their team in the first place, and how they manage the outpouring – or lack – of creative thinking that emerges during the process.

Telling the story

In order to convince, a masterplan has to communicate on several fronts: with investors, central Government and public sector stakeholders, and local communities. Communication skills are therefore as important as design and technical skills. To pitch a proposition that is sufficiently defined to convince the sceptical, while flexible enough to allow for differing future scenarios, and that appeals to diverse audiences, requires storytelling skills of a high order – storytelling, that is, in the sense of conjuring up a world, not telling lies. Showing 'roughly' what the vision will be like is a key issue - by definition, at the masterplanning stage, there is still plenty of uncertainty.   All sorts of people, from investors to residents, are likely to ask for more certainty than can realistically be provided.

Good masterplans deal with this difficult middle ground through a combination of words and visual images - backed up by thorough technical analysis.   Some so-called masterplans, though, offer little more than a cut and paste job – flash

imagery of other places with little real relevance to the task at hand (Barcelona is particularly popular). Others, backed up by reams of studies and technical analysis, offer a vision of the future of a place that is as boring as the survey data which is their sole source of inspiration.

Should masterplanning, therefore, be thought of as a creative process, or as a technical exercise?   A sort of false duality has arisen in the professional world, which has been played out for some time now, in the pages of the journals and on conference platforms, between a 'visionary' and a 'technocratic' model of masterplanning - or between passion and competence, perhaps.   Those commissioning masterplans should rise above this and demand the best of both worlds. The American novelist John Barth wrote of the art of storytelling (and lovemaking actually, but that's another story): 'Heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal…so does heartless skill. But what you want is passionate virtuosity'. Perhaps this sounds a bit much to ask for - but why not aim high?   A good masterplan should be comprehensive, covering all the bases.   It should come demonstrably both from the head and from the heart.

And crucially, both of these elements need to be marshalled into a coherent whole - the story - to avoid falling into the trap of the 'front and back' masterplan. In such cases, the creative vision (the front) and the solid technical data (the back) are both available, but the data has not informed the vision, the originators of each part have barely met and have little respect for each other – and nothing will ever come about as the result of the masterplan.

I don't particularly want the future of the city I live in to be determined either by technocrats or by visionaries. In fact, I don't want it to be determined at all. I am interested, though, in hearing and seeing some good ideas for its future delivered by a designer who is a storyteller with some common sense – someone who can sketch out a convincing possible future

and fire people up sufficiently to make them want to join up the dots in a common cause.

The checklists

'Design by checklist' is one of many traps that client and masterplanner between them need to avoid. Nevertheless, here are checklists of the key tasks for each.

The client's tasks

• Get partners and stakeholders on board as early as possible - if they haven't bought in to the brief, it will be difficult to get them to buy in to the masterplan which follows.
• Develop a brief which sets out clear ambitions for what is wanted from the masterplanning process - but remember that the outputs of a design process can only be defined loosely.
• Set a programme and budget which are adequate for the task at hand – good masterplans can't be done on the cheap.
• Appoint a consultant team with creative, technical and communication skills – and make sure they will collaborate rather than squabble.
• Inspire, lead and manage the consultant team – this is more than project management, important though that is.

The consultants' tasks

• Understand the place - do the homework and analysis, walk the site, get to know its geography, its history and its people.
• See the bigger picture - the 'red line' of the planning application to come is the curse of many an inadequate masterplan. Good masterplans make connections and open up possibilities beyond the site.
• Develop a vision - this won't come from analysing a situation to death. Sooner or later someone has to have some ideas.
• Turn the vision into a plan – a three-dimensional spatial proposition which sketches out ideas about linkages, routes, spaces, blocks and buildings.
• Communicate the plan - using words, pictures and diagrams to give everyone who is interested a good idea, not necessarily of what a place will be like, but of what it could be like.