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Urban Diversities – Environmental and Social Issues



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Time, Market Pressures, and Urban Regeneration

A Feasible Mix?

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Abstract

While acknowledging that urban regeneration is currently achieving significant positive results – innovative design, economic prosperity, and increase in numbers of urban inhabitants – this paper questions the capacity of prevailing approaches to develop socially sustainable solutions, in their search for compress development timescales to satisfy political and economic pressures. Looking at the process of regulation and management of development, the paper argues the potential role of design codes in shaping urban form based upon the experience of place as a way to structure an environment that can be inhabited, modified, and transformed to better suit changing demands. Urban design is proposed as a discipline that can design and manage change, although its theoretical base and education are in need of advancement and reform, to include the essential understanding of the human and social dimensions of space.

Key words: place experience, planning, urban regeneration

Across Europe and further afield, there is a growing awareness in academic, policy, and practitioner debates that creating and maintaining sustainable communities is a key component of urban design and regeneration. There is however less agreement about how such communities can be developed, or indeed about what constitutes a “sustainable community”. Within these debates there are those who argue for greater central control over the planning, design, and construction of communities, including an enhanced role for the state. Others take a different perspective, arguing for less state-led regulation and more control embedded within those directly involved in the construction process, what has loosely been termed the “free market”. With demographic pressures for increasing numbers of new homes and smaller households, there are suggestions that regeneration and renewal of communities and the development of new communities need to be “freed” to move forward apace, meeting the high targets for new buildings set by governments and meeting the demands for new houses. Others caution against this, often arguing that wider concerns linked to environmental and social spheres should not be compromised in the development process.

Resolving these contestations is difficult and this chapter does not aim to do so directly. Rather it explores the extent to which different technologies, or tools, might assist to offer a more sustainable future, one that enables sustainable communities to be developed.

Our thesis is: the desired development of mixed communities that are more sustainable socially will be the outcome of a “natural” cycle of “creative destruction” within local areas. We refer not only to physical regeneration and renewal – its visible expression – but also to renewal of the regulatory and institutional arrangements which shape development. This process of creative destruction arises from a sense of “crisis” and dissatisfaction with the existing regulation and control over regeneration (Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

There are two strands to the case we wish to make. First, our view is that the regeneration of many towns and cities across Europe is yielding certain benefits: The transformation of neglected city quarters is, in many cases, bringing innovative design, economic prosperity, and significant increase in numbers of urban inhabitants, albeit across a limited socio-economic spectrum. There is, however, growing evidence that prevailing approaches to urban regeneration may compromise the capability to achieve socially sustainable solutions because political and economic pressures compress development timescales to an extent that overprivileges commercial interests over social interests. In so doing, there is a conflation of the “natural” process of regeneration of urban areas; the three occupation phases have been identified by sociologists: undertaken by the risk-oblivious, the risk-aware, and the risk-adverse.

Second, the current process of regulation and management of the development process – the key elements of the planning system and urban design guidance – is proving inadequate to ensure that socially sustainable communities are being created. In this respect, the system is moving towards a crisis where key policy goals are not being met. In making a case for the adoption of more creative instruments, we are interested in developing design codes beyond their current use in identifying the physicality of the urban environment. Critically, we argue that to date the use of design codes has all too often neglected the social experience of place.

The British Planning System

There are worrying symptoms that in the UK the current planning practices which purport to support the regeneration of communities, towns, and cities are underperforming. The creative renewal process is not achieving its targets and we believe that some interventions are required. The planning system is meant to provide the means to encourage appropriate urban design; however in its current format in the UK, it has weaknesses affecting how appropriate design and management of places can be delivered, not only reactively through the development management of proposals but proactively through such mechanisms as design codes. However, those mechanisms designed to be proactive are often instead a pre-emptive reaction.

The planning profession is suffering from a skills gap that impairs its ability to deliver appropriate design and management of places. The concession that the current UK planning system is stifling appropriate design and development has seen the establishment of performance standards and the recent adoption of design codes to help rebalance guidance and control with quality design.

Urban design, thanks to its overlap with other disciplines such as architecture, planning, landscape architecture, geography, and sociology, is a key profession in the design management of change. However, there are challenges for urban design in undertaking this key role, mainly due to its theoretical underpinning (especially the close alignment with traditional master-planning and building design) and the “skills gap” of those with strategic visioning and design responsibilities.

Urban design could add definition and therefore clear goals and directions by expanding the currently mainly formal character of design codes to incorporate aspects of environment-behaviour research. At the moment, market pressures often make it difficult or not commercially expedient for the planning and design profession to adequately respond to, interpret, and follow current guidance, leaving socially responsive regeneration too often to fate and talent. By amending design codes to include current environment-behaviour research thus ensuring the codes address the social dimensions of place-making, it is possible to reinforce the effectiveness and applicability of planning guidance.

Conclusions from recent ESRC funded series of seminars (Cardiff, Birmingham, Nottingham, Bristol – Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne, Leeds, and Sheffield – Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, Belfast) have revealed that to achieve some of the 2021 Urban Task Force goals, British cities must equip themselves with strategic conception, delivery, and management tools for urban regeneration (i.e., citywide masterplans). Design-led regeneration needs to be redefined to include performance standards at its core to prevent the push for high-quality urbanism more often than not becoming the “pull of bling” or the “Bilbao effect” (Hebbert, 2008). The specific importance is that design codes are often better able to accommodate an assessment of the large gesture or gestures when a series of smaller, more time-consuming measures may be more effective and appropriate. The issue of performance standards then relates to the establishment of

such standards, the roles of those involved in their establishment, management, and implementation.

Some Background to Urban Regeneration in the UK

Natural, “bottom-up” socially responsive urban transformation can be characterised as a synthesis of occupation over time by three population groups, according to their perception of risk level (Duany, 2001). The spontaneous revitalisation of disused and neglected urban areas begins with colonisation by those who are risk-oblivious, attracted by perceptions of character, social interaction, freedom of expression rather than the prospect of capital gain. This tends to be an organic, community-led form of occupation that generates social rather than physical or economic benefit. Once this social benefit is established and recognised, a second wave of population becomes attracted to the area; those who appreciate the lifestyle opportunities and physical potential that the risk-oblivious have created. This second wave is risk-aware and includes those from secure socio-economic groups attracted by lifestyle and the investment potential of their activities. This tier of occupation over time retains the setting’s fundamental character while introducing physical upgrades that eventually become reflected in increasing property prices and rental values. Growing economic value and the retention and enhancement of intrinsic physical and social character then attract a third tier of occupant. These are the risk-adverse: Investors interested primarily by the prospect of commercial gain and who may not have further interest in the urban area after that commercial gain has been achieved. The net result of this can often be a mixed community of wide-ranging occupants with diverse socio-economic profiles that can collectively sustain the setting’s economic and social heart and its environmental quality.

Urban renaissance policies adopted across the EU have viewed the formation of such a blend of mixed communities and enhanced economic value as essential for the formation of sustainable development and sustainable communities. In so doing, however, they have often focused attention on the goal, the third and therefore risk-adverse phase, rather more than the process that leads to it, inadvertently enhancing the value of this third phase and devaluing the urban spaces created in the earlier phases. Overlooked here is that the formation of such characteristics is associated with a process which takes time. The problem today is that often those responsible for urban regeneration and renewal cannot afford (both financially and temporally) such rhythms to take their own course. Because of market pressures, the need for rapid economic return, and low perceived value attached to the nature of renewal and community arising from first and second phase, they seek interventions which guide and implement urban renewal to phase 3 as rapidly as possible. A corollary of this is that socially responsive aspects of well meaning (but perhaps not strong enough) current guidance in development are undervalued or ignored where socially beneficial messages are perceived of little relevance to the commercially oriented third phase. This is a question, in practice, of what is considered essential, and what is incidental, and from what point of view. Design codes often

understandably attempt to engage the risk adverse on their own ground, and hence fall into the trap of mistaking the essential (social sustainability) for the incidental (minimising risk and speeding up development).

There are clear references to Jane Jacobs, G. Cullen, C. Alexander, et al. currently included in urban design guidance and several places possess/represent fine design and civic pride but too often "regeneration" produces places that succeed in attracting people to the city centres, but fail in keeping them there, putting down roots, raising their families, and developing a sustainable neighbourhood. Their success depends on a continuous supply of well-paid, transient professional people, attracted by "boutique" environments marketed for lifestyle opportunities that are often sterile and experientially vacuous, and could be gradually abandoned to become the slums of tomorrow. Max Hutchinson warned of this possibility 5 years ago in a BBC TV local news report about the, then, ongoing construction of Leeds' Clarence Dock development. Recent economic downturn has graphically demonstrated how vulnerable such development practice is, as now Hutchinson's warning is starting to look very much like a prophecy (Hutchinson, 2006).

Perhaps urban design guidance so far has overlooked some of the messages implicit in the writings of Jacobs et al., that an urban order defined in terms of the dynamic actions of human subjects must be allowed space and time to unfold gradually, to grow and evolve, mature and settle. Because of the complexity, the interrelation, reciprocal influence, and implications of the aspects which entail change, the key to pursue well-being and quality of life lies in the design management of change, which begs the questions: Which are the professionals that should be in charge of this very strategic task? Is there sufficient provision of such figures, and do they have the tools to do so?

Discussion and Conclusion

The Urban Designer

Cuthbert (2007) suggests that urban design, because of its in-betweenness between architecture and planning, has so-far been characterised by a fairly chaotic, anarchic, unfounded sequence of creative ideas bearing little or no coherence with each other and has consequently failed in establishing a relationship between design and societal processes. He argues the need for legitimisation of urban design through the establishment of theoretical grounds, connected to the economic, political, social, and cultural processes which shape social life (ibid.: 1). Ultimately, this would allow the fruitful establishment of "performance standards", as suggested by Hebbert, and consequently the significant assessment of projects before they are ordained, and after, to understand necessary modifications and determine needed change (ibid.: 179).

Assuming that this will happen in the future, and offering ideas for the establishment of some of such theoretical grounding from within the field of environment-behaviour studies, this discussion suggests that urban design would be a well-placed discipline to take up the

challenge, thanks to its complex range of expertise, its versatile approach to problem solving and method of working, and its understanding of issues at different scales. Obviously, this description of urban design depends upon (1) the education, (2) the practice, and (3) the role and status of urban design within policy and planning, and depends once again on the definition of a theoretic framework which disentangles itself from the various professions and new corporations which hold interests in shaping the built environment (*ibid.*).

There is some degree of concern to the news of studies that indicate a dramatic skills shortage in strategic visioning and design among, primarily, the municipality staff. Among this, a recent report by Arup called “Mind the Skills Gap” has revealed that *in most built environment professions more and more people are retiring and recruitment levels cannot keep up with demand* and this is a major problem in that it is not only a question of adding capacity, but of replacing it. Urban designers are the worst hit, with 91% of positions expected to be vacant by 2012 (Morris, 2007). Equally worrying is that it is the public sector which struggles most to recruit and retain young talented professionals who possess the skills to deliver sustainable communities and places, much less so the private sector, revealing a structural weakness of British civic life, the limited fiscal and decisional autonomy that municipalities hold (Hebbert, 2008).

A number of initiatives are on the way to address this skills shortage but there is still a catch: Urban designers work within the planning context, following its guidance and laws. The structure and thrust of this context plays therefore a crucial role in how effective urban design can be.

Urban Design in Context: Strength and Weaknesses of the British (Planning) System

Most Western capitalist societies allow the marketplace to be the major arbitrator of competing goals and means for establishing the nature of the society. In some countries, the public sector has intervened more strongly than in others in establishing priorities for the quality of the city form. In these, the professional designer as policy maker (or, more likely, as the advisor of the policy maker) tends to play a larger role than, say, in the United States, where power is spread more diffusely among individuals, albeit within certain limits. Thus professional designers have had greater impact on the design of the cities in Western Europe than on those in the United States (Lang, 1994).

Within the British system designers have had an impact but there is the potential for the designer to have an even more profound effect, especially if the system can address its shortcomings and if the design professions step forward in creating places based on sound UD principles; that is where codes and more stringent standards, especially if they are underpinned by environment behaviour studies, come into the picture (and where addressing the skills gap becomes paramount if planners are to work in such mediums).

The nature of the British planning system requires that nearly all development receives permission from the local planning authority (as opposed to, for example, the American zoning system in which whole classes of development are permitted as of right).

This has the attraction of being able to restrict certain development as a matter of principle. However over the years, the system has developed a set of instruments that offer guidance primarily to prevent the worst abuses rather than promote and deliver quality urban design and development. The result has been a form of institutional inertia to new design and practices. In this constraining context, the question is from where can the aspiration for quality come? What space is there for quality and innovation? Is this likely to come from local authorities or developers?

Planning advice and guidance have in the UK a great challenge, which needs to be resolved: They must be guarantor of design quality, maintain a protective dimension, and guarantee economic development. It is often the case that the argument for economic development prevails, no matter how ill founded (i.e., in Scotland until the mid-1990s, often any development was good, quality was a secondary issue). To be able to remedy all this, design guidance must be comprehensive, clear, and prescriptive.

The Difference Between Guidance and Statement: The Nut to Crack

Substantial planning guidance is produced every year in the UK. Beautifully illustrated, superficially persuasive documents are published regularly. There is, nevertheless, a substantial quality gap between such guidance and what gets built. Guidance suggests without requesting, leaving the final decision open to human arbitration (Duany, 2008). Development control and planning consent are often given on the basis of compliance of uses and economic targets and, in the case of substantial regeneration schemes, do not go to design, delivery, and management detail, leaving this to developers.

Precision and adoption of assessment criteria and targets are the most powerful tools to achieve and control outcomes. They are also best able to gain a well-deserved place with those that today are among the stronger determinants of development, such as transport engineers and environmentalists. This requires theoretical frameworks from which to clarify problems, criteria of analysis assessment, and creative action which urban design does not yet possess.

The reason behind this is twofold: (1) urban design is still very much self-referential and (2) urban design, as most of all other disciplines related to the design of the built environment, is not yet substantially engaged with theory and does not yet possess a breadth of knowledge which could enable urban designers to study and understand, and consequently act upon many urban problems (Cuthbert, 2007). All attempts to date to define urban design have missed the key step of defining its theoretical object (civic society) and its real object (the public realm).

If these main issues were addressed, then it could be possible to give precise and clear guidance and guarantee more appropriate production of places which more correctly respond to shared systems of values and needs (Castells' (1997) "urban meaning", "urban functions", "urban form", "urban social change", and finally "urban design" as a related set of interdependent levels, context, relativity, and processes). At this point, the use of

standards rather than guidance, or at least the availability of both, could become a fruitful tool towards clarity.

Cuthbert's reference for urban design is spatial political economy. Our suggestion is that environment-behaviour studies, in their focus on the relationships between people and space at every level, could be an equally substantiating ground.

Design Codes Can Raise Quality

Design codes attempt to identify the physical components of place-making, a nebulous figment within practically all planning guidance documents that is rarely, if ever, substantiated except by perhaps some pictures of a café strewn street. Design codes are usually written in the hope that they can provide the physical framework that will allow a place to succeed over the long term. Recent experience in England has highlighted advantages of design codes to speed up the planning process, provide certainty for developers, and help achieve environmental standards. In addition the study also suggested that design codes generated a consensus, by which the design aspirations could be agreed with local authority planners (and often with the local community), and then made mandatory for developers.

While design codes may quantify the physical elements of successful places, for example, street and pavement width, scale and massing of buildings, building material, environmental resources, etc. what is missing are the psychological and ultimately the social elements. In other words urban designers are usually just guessing when it comes to how people will respond to them. Infusing design codes with research and evidence, both quantifiable and qualifiable, based on how people experience places would certainly mitigate some of the risk in this regard. Certainly in this age when sustainability is at the heart of all guidance related to the built environment, the element of sustainability that gets overlooked the most in favour of green standards is the socially responsive element, that giving a place the best chance to succeed in the long term requires more than just acceptance or tolerance of place by the inhabitants but rather conceptions such as affinity, affection, and even intimacy with places. To be "sustainable" buildings and communities must last over time and if environmental psychology can provide critical knowledge in the way people relate to their environments then it is only logical they be used within prescriptive planning and design methods such as codes in order to achieve maximum effect.

The planning system should address the use of codes and their potential benefit at all tiers – national, regional, and local. Codes generally work best at a more local scale; hence they are most effective when used within supplementary planning guidance, masterplans, local development strategies, etc. However, given the negative perceptions of them within the design community (based usually on unfounded criticisms that they inhibit the creative freedom of the architect or favour one type of architecture over another) the more explicit references to their use at levels the better. Advocation should cascade down the planning system extending from national (through policy, guidance documents, advice notes, circulars, etc.) to the regional tier and then embedded within local plan policies.

Our suggestion is that supplementary planning guidance could raise the quality bar avoiding the risk and limitations of having to rely upon individuals with ambitions to deliver effectively, and in particular that design codes be formulated to keep creativity and allow for guidance and framework.

The challenge is dual: On the one side, develop ambitious, considered, informed guidance; on the other, create a delivery and management system which can ensure the pursuit of multidimensional quality (i.e., sustainable places for a sustainable life).

The authors of this chapter are currently engaged on both fronts.

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