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Foreword, Jules Pipe

The history of London’s growth is made up of distinct places and diverse communities. Unlike many European cities, London expanded by taking in neighbouring towns and villages – a pattern recognised by Rasmussen and visualised by Abercrombie’s 1943 County of London Plan.

London changes, but it continues to be a city of villages. As we face a new generation of growth, how can we preserve the individual character of these places, and make them work better for all Londoners?

Pursuing growth for growth’s sake is not the answer. Instead, the Mayor has set out his vision for “good growth”: This means proactively shaping the way London’s places change so that they are more equitable, and supporting development that is socially, spatially and economically inclusive. It demands a shift in our approach to placemaking.

Good design should be the rule, not the exception. We need to invest high-quality placemaking, planning and architecture in Londoners’ everyday experience of the city, not just the most prominent projects. This will mean finding new ways for London’s extraordinary concentration of placemaking talent to contribute their skills and ideas for the benefit of all our communities.

We want to build London’s capacity to deliver good growth. Local authorities play a vital role as the stewards of places, and increasingly as developers of housing in their own right. But we recognise the pressures boroughs are under to deliver more results with fewer resources. That is why we are developing new initiatives, like Public Practice and the GLA Viability Team, to make sure we have the right skills in the right places to support the quantity and quality of growth that London needs.

Of course, the quantity of growth we deliver will rely on the quality of the places we create. For existing communities to support new development, they need to be able to share in the opportunities it brings. There are examples in these essays where this has been achieved, and the common thread between them is long-term commitment to place – from developers, communities and political leadership.

This publication is a valuable reminder that making great places takes time. It involves a thoughtful approach to working with what’s
already there, as much as planning ahead for what will come next. As we begin a new London Plan, it’s important that the decisions we make now bring about good growth that works for London’s existing places and people – and has a positive legacy long into the future.

Endnotes
Foreword, Dan Labbad

The need for the places in which we live to adapt to a rapidly changing world presents society with its most urgent challenges. Rising social and economic pressures created by a growing and ageing population, housing and skills shortages, unemployment, inequality and climate change are magnified in contemporary urban settings. The future quality of life, and even survival, of many millions of people rests on finding successful responses to these challenges.

None of us have all the answers to the problems that beset London: that’s why we at Lendlease are working in partnership with Centre for London and a wide range of people and organisations at local, city and national levels to explore ideas, learn from others’ experiences, and to help discover, test and implement best practice in placemaking.

In governments and institutions around the world we are seeing the effects of an epidemic of mistrust. To build trust and support for regeneration of urban places, we need to fundamentally shift the way that regeneration is perceived by the people whose lives it touches. We need to change these perceptions, moving away from a suspicion of gentrification and towards the next generation of regeneration, built on trust.

Good, inclusive regeneration is about leveraging private sector investment and expertise to work in partnership with the public sector and communities, achieving lasting socio-economic and environmental outcomes that local government and civil society cannot deliver or afford on their own. Regeneration should be built on the foundation of a fair deal, transparently communicated to build trust with local people.

Thoughtful placemaking, informed by meaningful engagement and involvement of local people, has the power to help communities flourish; provide pathways into education and lasting employment; cultivate local business and economic growth; enhance indoor and outdoor environments; improve connectivity; and, ultimately, provide a ‘place’ that offers to enhance the wellbeing of all those that experience it.

Placemaking is a powerful and exciting art, which needs to respond to and anticipate a complex web of (often) competing needs, demands and desires. This set of essays makes an important contribution to the art of placemaking by inviting a wide range of perspectives and ideas – to help us rise to the challenge of creating the very best places.
Few challenges are as complex and urgent for London as finding a way to accommodate growth while respecting and enhancing the patchwork of buildings and spaces, high streets and cafés, squares and stations, and parks and pubs that defines the city’s character.

As London works towards the Mayor’s annual housing target of 49,000 new homes, we are delighted to publish this collection of papers, supported by Lendlease, that asks: how can design and quality of place support the process of development? How can we ensure that in attempting to meet London’s immediate needs, we do not sacrifice the features that make the city worth living in?

As public sector designers, academics, architects and planners, our contributors bring diverse views on the priorities and principles of placemaking. While this collection does not provide a blueprint for placemaking, it does recommend a number of principles and priorities – including those set out by Ben Rogers in his essay on the importance of the public realm. Quality of place is something that emerges from civic life, from the interaction of people and place, rather than being conjured from grand plans. For spaces to have social, civic and economic value, they need to be designed with people at their heart.

As Professor Alan Penn explains, there is growing academic evidence that place matters; there is far more to “location, location, location” than an estate agent catchphrase. Street patterns and proximity create value and communicate with citizens, who then create and reinforce the value and meaning of spaces through use. Placemaking is intrinsically civic in character: citizens create good places, and good places enable self-determination on the part of those citizens.

The configuration of spaces can help or hinder the process. Open networks of connected streets will always beat sealed-off suburban cul-de-sacs, but there are no universal templates that can be used to create good places. Indeed, a common theme among these papers is the sense that over-prescriptive design and curation is counterproductive, liable to create anodyne non-spaces that could be in any neighbourhood.
of any modern city – places where, to use Alan Penn's analogy, we lose the signal.

Robert Bevan extends this idea of quality of place as something that emerges rather than is imposed, writing in praise of the accretion of mess and meaning in multi-layered cities, where innovation and culture can flourish – and taking aim at some of London's recent developments for their failure to accommodate this complexity. This perspective is shared by Ben Rogers, who also identifies some light-touch interventions and strategies for the public realm that can make places work better in the context of tight public finances.

Many of London's places have acquired their character over centuries, but the city is also seeing intense change from both new building development and infrastructure development. Two of our papers examine how public and private sectors should work together to design, build and manage spaces.

Neale Coleman looks back at the London 2012 project – at how the Olympics were used as a catalyst to remodel one of London's most complex and constrained places as a new sub-regional centre for east London, and at the structures and mechanisms that enabled this to happen. Sadie Morgan writes about the role that design champions can have in promoting the value of place in major capital projects, where budgets are always stretched and deadlines always looming.

Two other contributors contend with the idea of putting people at the heart of placemaking. Daisy Froud shares with us her experience 'on the ground' in community engagement, and grapples with the challenge of how the process of regeneration, when done properly, can encourage active participation in democracy – as well as debate at local levels and above.

Indy Johar focuses on a similar question: how can regeneration stimulate positive socio-economic impacts for a range of stakeholders? Focusing on the financing and delivery of urban renewal, he argues that, in order to restore credibility and impact to ‘regeneration’, what is required is a citizen-centric approach that develops shared interests alongside economic development. The aim, in short, is both a process and an outcome that has social impact at its heart. Whom do we make places for if not people?
Introduction

Our final contributors focus on the importance of the planning process as a way of setting parameters and balancing competing interests, and the challenges that planning faces in the 21st-century city. Finn Williams emphasises the continuing role that public sector planners and architects play in ensuring quality of place, but also highlights a crisis in planning. Local authority departments are under-resourced and over-worked, particularly in comparison to previous decades: in 1976, 49 per cent of architects went into public service, while today the proportion is less than 1 per cent.

The solution, Williams argues, is in highlighting the value and potential of public service practice to graduates, and in enabling councils to recruit passionate and talented planners and architects for year-long placements at affordable rates.

The planning process could do with a refit too, Euan Mills argues, with new technology capable of improving both efficiency and inclusivity. Indeed, given the ubiquity of digitisation, it is remarkable that the primary means of sharing planning applications is tethering a piece of paper to a tree or lamp post. Mills argues that the judicious adoption of technologies could not only improve engagement with citizens – for example, with the use of 3D modelling – but also the responsiveness of the planning system, by using real-time data outputs to inform long-term policies.

London’s places have been formed over centuries, both by the (sometimes) flawed implementation of grand plans, and by the gradual and occasionally messy accumulation and transformation of character. The papers in this volume reflect that history, and also capture the lessons that have been learnt about careful intervention – both to preserve quality of place and to allow citizens to make new places that will support civic life into the next century. Buildings come and go: places endure.
While writing this text, the last remains of the South Eastern Railway offices at London Bridge station were being cleared away from Tooley Street. One of the capital’s few sharply wedged ‘flat-iron’ buildings – similar to that icon of midtown Manhattan – had bitten the dust.

The South Eastern Railway HQ occupied a triangular sliver of land between the pavement and the mainline station behind. It wasn’t listed, and it wasn’t amazing architecture, but it was intriguing: a quirk, a tapered oddity with a blade-thin nose barely a room wide. It added a layer of complexity to this part of London, which piles up from Roman remains in the Thames gravel to Renzo Piano’s Shard.

In the face of much opposition, Network Rail decided that the flat-iron had to go, in order to make way for a new street-level entrance to London Bridge station. But this wasn’t essential, even if access had been vital at this point: it would have been feasible to arcade the South Eastern Railway’s ground floor, allowing passengers to flow under it from street to station, as a number of commentators have pointed out.

The South Eastern Railway building’s removal is the product of a compulsive desire to tidy; to smooth out urban wrinkles. Neat edges and regularity, rather than the arrhythmia that is the genuine pulse of chaotic city life. And a desire for a brand marker of regenerative change, perhaps.

Keeping Britain messy

However, we shouldn’t be keeping Britain tidy (to paraphrase the national anti-litter campaign launched in the 1950s); we should be keeping it messy. This is not a call for littering: instead, it is a desire to maintain the layering, the collage, the contingency that it is essential to creative cities. There is an understandable desire to impose order on the disorder of a city – if only to mitigate pollution and other
threats to wellbeing. But London has been characterised as resisting such impulses, in comparison to Continental or North American cities and the grand planning that more often characterises them. Famously, Sir Christopher Wren’s proposals for reconstruction to an orderly, Baroque plan after the Great Fire foundered on pragmatism.

There has been, however, a steady trajectory in London towards order over the centuries, from the emergence of set-piece developments (beginning with Inigo Jones’s 1631 Covent Garden and Lincoln’s Inn Fields) to the slum clearances of the Victorian age that deliberately drove roads through the heart of rookeries such as that at St Giles – today’s Centre Point.

Interestingly, the difficulty in creating a lively street that ‘fits’ with London is not recent, as the dispiriting character of many ‘new’ roads – New Oxford Street, Shaftesbury Avenue and Kingsway, for example – still demonstrates today. Even Regent Street’s Beaux Arts hauteur is hard to warm to, even while one can appreciate its restored splendour.

The order-imposing trajectory continued through the garden city movement and the segregation and zoning of modernist utopian planning which were, in equal parts, progressive demands for a better quality of life and a method of diffusing opposition to the status quo. Not for nothing did Le Corbusier warn: “architecture or revolution?” The mob could be bought off, he thought – or designed out.

It is therefore no accident that, historically, the interesting, grittier things happened in parts of cities where imposed grids and their controlling instincts broke down – non-Haussmann Montmartre, for instance, or Broadway in New York.

The rise of conformity

From the late 1960s various competing trends emerged to challenge the hegemony of mainstream Modernism and its tidying ways: Jane Jacobs had written her hugely influential Death and Life in Great American Cities in defence of traditional inner-city neighbourhoods under threat from grandiose masterplanning,¹ and Robert Venturi’s book Complexity and Contradiction marked a new interest in everyday architecture rather than grandeur or purity.²
Keep London messy

The bulldozing of Euston Arch had cemented conservation sentiments while squatting and housing cooperatives were on the rise. Architect Walter Segal had made self-build easy in Lewisham, and the anarchic Non-Plan that rejected state control expounded in New Society (but with its legacy being a direct line to development corporations rather than anything more anarchic). In the 1970s, Oscar Newman’s defensible space theories, with their call for strict boundaries between public and private territory, were gaining currency.

By the time Margaret Thatcher arrived as Prime Minister in 1979, then, two post-Modernist strands and a third, corporate Modernist strand were vying to govern urban design in London. The authoritarian strand stressed segregation, drawing on Newman. Alice Coleman, an academic with the government’s ear, was busy counting dog shit deposits and suggesting that too many doors off council block landings was proof positive that single motherhood was leading to the End Times. This was a strand that soon led to Secured by Design and its crudely determinist equation: this architecture produces that behaviour.

Countering this were more supple responses to modernity, such as the influential Responsive Environments urban design programme at (then) Oxford Polytechnic that stressed matters such as traditional public front/private back perimeter blocks and active frontages – without resorting to the historical imagery of some traditionalists.³

At UCL, meanwhile, the Space Syntax team was successfully demonstrating Jacobs’ thesis with hard data. They showed that segregation was just about the worst thing you could do to a neighbourhood and that interconnection and the presence of others, strangers, on a street were what kept areas safe.⁴ These were approaches subsequently popularised in the 1990s by Richard Rogers and which, for a short while, found their way into government policy following the Towards an Urban Renaissance report.⁵

It is easy now to forget the extent of dereliction in 1980s London – the vast swathe of docks, railway lands and riverfront that characterised the city was yet to fully recover from the Second World War, the loss of its colonies and depopulation. Deindustrialisation was still headlong. In 1952, the UK was responsible for a quarter of world manufacturing exports: today that figure is below 2 per cent.
Architects Caruso St John are not alone in recalling, in essays and speeches, the sheer potential of those sites and that time: an incomparable heritage of industrial and commercial architecture that could have been added to, layered up, reinterpreted. Instead, much was swept away entirely, and it has been corporate modernism with a sharp, authoritarian edge that has triumphed, straightening out London’s oddness in favour of the coarse-grained zoning exemplified by Canary Wharf, which is fundamentally Modernist in its segregation of people, traffic and function – even if some buildings are wrapped in post-Modernist drag.

Canary Wharf heralded the development corporation delivery model, the privatisation of the public realm, the heavy security and heavily programmed street ‘life’, making it the poster child for corporate placemaking. It is trickle-down neoliberalism in three dimensions – and precious little trickled down to the poor neighbourhoods of the East End. It shifted the production and consumption of the public realm in a direction that bypassed community cohesion.

Further, it was the threat to the City from Canary Wharf – in conjunction with Big Bang financial deregulation – that saw London’s rulebook on tall buildings torn up. The consequence? There has followed a proliferation of vertical gated communities and commercial towers such as the ‘Walkie Talkie’, where a book-ahead private rooftop café’s terrace masquerades as a public park.

**Loss of creative spaces**

In the process, London’s creative interstices – the tatty warehouses, the scrappy railway arches, the cheap short-life housing that once allowed cultural innovators the financial space to experiment – are vanishing. Steamrollered by a white-hot residential property market, a 2014 study for the Mayor of London found that 3,500 artists are likely to lose their studios before 2020 – some 30 per cent of the total.

This is a catastrophe for a city that doesn’t manufacture so much as think. Creative and cultural industries contribute some £21bn to London’s economy and provide one in six new jobs, as well as much of London’s credibility internationally. You cannot pickle a shark in a bedsit.
Keep London messy

In the place of this genuinely productive, unruly and untidy world we have the ersatz, commodified version of it that convinces no one. Railway arch businesses in Brixton that have provided families a living for generations are displaced by pop-ups, while ‘art wash’ exercises commission temporary graffiti to drive up street-cred and property prices before moving local artists on.

For every Brixton or Borough Market there is a Camden or Spitalfields that has been lost to the tidiers. These latter areas were once commercial incubators for design graduates selling their own innovative wares, some of which have since made their way into the V&A’s collections. They were spaces of production, not just consumption.

Camden and Spitalfields (and others besides) are now dominated by imported tat re-exported to unwise tourists – Londoners certainly aren’t fooled. In such ways, placemaking becomes a cynical, sleight-of-hand con trick.

A city can lose its creative credentials remarkably quickly (and post-Brexit referendum, these are something London can ill afford to lose). When the anti-cosmopolitan New South Wales government imposed a curfew on Sydney’s nightlife in 2014, known as the “lock-out laws,” this, coupled with a property market as terrifying as London’s, wrecked the city’s nightlife. Footfall dropped by 80 per cent in some areas as bars, restaurants, live-music venues and other small businesses closed.

A creative exodus is beginning. Sydney’s most lively remaining neighbourhood is trying to resist under the slogan “Keep Newtown Weird,” but the Harbour City lost a good deal of its lustre in only a matter of months.

While starting from a much higher base of activity, London’s nighttime economy is suffering too. 40 per cent of its live music venues have gone during the past decade and, of late, some 10 pubs per week. It can only be so long before Berlin, Lisbon and Melbourne become more appealing to the young companies that provide London’s lifeblood.

Cultural asset-stripping eats away at a city’s joie-de-vivre, turning music venues that helped launch new musical genres into another Wetherspoon branch (such as the Marquee Club). The importance of sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll to the vitality of a city are not to be sniffed at – and are not orderly activities (if done right).
What are the prospects for the next Soho or Shoreditch, be it Hackney Wick, Peckham or Deptford, when as soon as an independent coffee shop opens Foxtons is right on their heels to price them out, and the new neighbours immediately demand that the music is turned down?

**Homogeneity and inequality**

With London losing its industrial land at three times the anticipated rate, these are not just issues for creatives or partying millennials. Changes to permitted development rights and allowing unfettered changes between planning use classes are trumpeted as reducing red tape, but are really driven by free-market ideologues to maximise profit whatever the cost in homogenised high streets, employment sites and the deracination of long-standing, diverse communities.

London’s great strength has its been cohesive mosaic of communities, the everyday proximity of the other. But from right to buy, to the social cleansing via changes to tenure on redeveloped council estates, this rich pattern is fading into uniformity. It is the kindness of strangers that underpins the successfully cosmopolitan city, but the cosmopolitan is increasingly viewed with suspicion.

At the same time, there is the sanitising tendency of some London boroughs, Business Improvement District managers and corporates to move out those they deem as anti-social, with an astonishing lack of empathy. The segregation of London by use and income will drive the disadvantaged to the city edge (as in Paris), marginalising and distancing the ‘other’, reducing community integration and, potentially, allowing extremism to fester.

The privatisation of the public realm has been captured in Anna Minton’s admirable book *Ground Control*, but Minton goes further, wary of the concept of the narrative, dismissing it as the product of New Labour politicking and the advertising world. The idea of authenticity has also come under fire as inauthentic, a way of hipsters inventing provenance for the next lifestyle must-have. But the narrative and the authentic are too valuable as concepts to allow them to be co-opted and rendered meaningless by the marketeers.

Placemaking that derives from an understanding of the morphological evolution and purpose of an area over time – an authentic narrative
– not only adds richness to the outcomes but teaches us to value the layered, the bricolage, the loose ends where the unexpected can emerge in fruitful ways. Somewhere, between the Scylla of trying to control outcomes (however utopian) and the Charybdis of the free market, are successful loose-fit solutions to placemaking that also have the adaptability necessary to endure over time.

There are similar balances to be struck between openness and privacy – surveillance is not necessarily a bad thing if it is by a human at a bay window, but is alienating when it is CCTV’s anonymous, all-seeing eye. Defensible space is, likewise, fine as a half-level change that raises a window sill above the street, but less useful when it’s a locked gate.

The value of the historic artefact, meanwhile, is not simply its aesthetic quality or formal heritage significance, but its ability to facilitate continuity in a community’s cultural memory and in the recognition that old buildings *per se* can often accommodate low-rental uses because they don’t have to recoup the costs of new-build. There is a rewarding richness in layering the historic and contemporary – whether they are subtle or in dramatic juxtaposition.

**London’s authentic character**

Of course, there is the conundrum of trying to achieve all this without it being too forced, too self-conscious and without directive architectural determinism. It is about creating places that allow the conditions for something unexpected to emerge authentically rather than dictating in detail and with artifice what that outcome will be. At the same time, we can remember that spontaneity sometimes works best when it has at least some degree of thoughtfulness.

Back in 1877 when William Morris founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, it was soon nicknamed ‘Anti-Scrape’ for its opposition to the scraping away of the later accretions of cathedrals in order to get back to some conjectural pure form. Perhaps there should be an anti-scrape attitude to defend today’s public realm; heterogeneity, not homogeneity, is essential to London’s character.

On the opposite side of Tooley Street from the empty site of the South Eastern Railway building is More London – 13 acres of sterility
Making good – shaping places for people

masterplanned by Foster and Partners. Here, the buildings rest like canapés on a slate tray of the type that used to be circulated around architecture cocktail parties in the late 90s.

They are so slightly rooted in London’s essential earthiness that they feel like they could be wiped away with the brush of a hand. Smooth grey surfaces like wall-to-wall carpets unfurl in every direction between cookie-cutter branches of takeaway chains and the newly scraped London Bridge. Richness and complexity has been stripped out between station and river.

This is the antithesis of what London should be. As the phrase attributed to Van Gogh put it: “Normality is a paved road: it’s comfortable to walk on, but no flowers grow on it.”

Endnotes

In defence of the realm:  
10 principles for public space

Ben Rogers

The urban public realm matters. Our impressions of a city we visit for the first time are primarily shaped by its streets, squares and parks. If its streets are ugly, filthy or threatening – or for that matter dull and over-controlled – we are unlikely to want to return. There is no successful tourist city anywhere that does not have a rich and inviting public realm.

If the public realm matters to tourists, it matters all the more to residents. Building on the insights of Jane Jacobs, that great student of street life, social scientists have come to appreciate that the spaces between buildings can foster connections of distinct and influential kinds.¹ They shape neighbourhood ties. They militate against loneliness. They can encourage community action, facilitate political mobilisation, help prevent crime and support the socialisation of young people.

Public, semi-public or ‘third’ spaces like pubs, cafés and libraries provide places to share ideas – what economists call “spill-over effects” that impact urban productivity.² And of course, an attractive public realm is good for our health, both physical and mental – we are much more likely to get active when we have attractive spaces to be active in.³

We can go deeper still: the way the public realm is designed and run reflects and shapes values, culture and social structure. Social hierarchies are reflected and sustained in the way that public spaces are designed and controlled, and also through patterns of use and behaviour. Modern dictators tend to go for large, imposing city squares, flanked by government buildings – these spaces lend themselves well to military parades, and can be easily controlled.

Our most successful civic-minded cities, by contrast, are generally characterised by a rich and varied network of largely informal public
and semi-public spaces. As a general rule: the more varied and lively a city’s public realm, the richer and more democratic its civil society.

**London’s public realm resurgent**

If I am right in emphasising the value of the space between buildings, it follows that one of the great challenges of our fast-urbanising world is to build and extend the public realm. Yes, city dwellers need decent housing, clean air and water, reliable energy and good schools, but we also need places where we can connect and collaborate as neighbours, friends, associates and citizens.

London is fortunate in its public realm. As Steen Eiler Rasmussen argued in his classic London, Unique City, first published 80 years ago, the combination of layout and architecture makes London exceptionally liveable. I am not sure that any other large city can match the variety and conviviality of its streets, squares, parks, arcades and lanes.

Recently, big steps have been made towards rebalancing our city away from motorists and towards pedestrians. Transport for London (TfL) estimates that central London has lost about 30 per cent of its road space, as pavements have been widened, bus and bike lanes introduced, and experiments in ‘shared space’ conducted. Some major new public spaces have been created – most obviously the former Olympic (now Queen Elizabeth) Park – and a long stretch of the South Bank brought to public life.

The Mayor, TfL and boroughs have made important contributions, but developers have often led the way – notably in central London, where both the historic estates and new landowners have invested heavily in architecture and public realm. As ever in London, the best results are achieved when different layers of government, developers, landowners, civic organisations and community groups work together.

**The urban commons**

The public realm is, by definition, an open democratic realm. It works best when it manages to connect people to each other in open space while operating with minimal management or oversight. Of course, no one wants the public authorities to abandon our public realm altogether. We want to know that we can pick up the phone and call 999 if we see
In defence of the realm: 10 principles for public space

someone being assaulted in the street. We appreciate it when those in charge of our parks lay on activities for children and young people – especially during the long summer holidays. But the public realm should belong to and, as much as possible, be looked after and animated by the public.

Writing in London Essays, Charles Leadbeater has argued that the inspiration for London’s parks should be the ancient commons. The same can be said of London’s streets and squares. Too much neglect will kill the public realm. But too much control – or indeed too much design and ‘curation’ – can do the same. The art lies in designing and running spaces so that we feel empowered to look after them ourselves.

Principles

Here I set out 10 principles that we need to follow if we want London’s public realm to work on the model of a commons:

1. Learn from London’s architectural history. If people choose to pay a premium to live in the historic parts of the city, it is in large part because they like the layout and mix of activities on offer.
2. Make the most of London’s historic built form – which can include 1960s heritage as well as 1860s. The public realm is by definition a collective thing. The public spaces we tend to value and admire the most are the work of many hands, including hands long since dead. They link us to earlier, often varied, cultures, styles and technologies.
3. Design streets and squares so that they can look after themselves and don’t need extensive monitoring or maintenance. This means no hidden and indefensible spaces or expensive water and lighting schemes, unless there is an income stream to pay for them.
4. Keep public space truly public. The default should be that ‘public space’ is owned and run by public authorities, or in some cases, trusts with a strong and clear public benefit duty. There is space in new developments for semi-public spaces, on the model of, for example, Holland Park’s communal gardens. But private roads, streets and gated developments should not be permitted.
5. Build to a human scale. Towers have their place but they need a lot of thought in the way they hit the ground. There is much debate about London’s skyline, but what about the street-line? As Jane Jacobs argued 50 years ago, narrow streets are, as a general rule, better than wide, and small blocks better than large.

6. Plan and design to generate outdoor activity. Public activity is largely a function of two factors: the density of a neighbourhood, and the mix of activities in it. Of course, a neighbourhood can be too busy – many people like the quiet of London’s suburbs. But an area needs a good level and mix of activity if its streets are to feel lively and safe.

7. Plan, design and manage for small businesses. Large businesses (such as supermarkets) bring efficiency, but they tend to have little stake in local place. Small businesses take a long-term interest in a neighbourhood and give it personality and character. Providing for small retail units and supporting pop-up uses can encourage small business activity even in relatively expensive areas.

8. Where possible, design and manage roads and streets on ‘shared space’ principles. Don’t let vehicles dominate – but don’t let pedestrians dominate, either. Vehicles have their place in the city and in most cases can live side-by-side with pedestrians. Keep regulation to a minimum – the fewer road signs and street markings the better.

9. Make public space green. Some of our most valued public spaces are almost entirely grey; Trafalgar Square being the obvious example. But trees and plants, and the wildlife they sustain, humanise a city and draw people outdoors (as well, of, as combatting pollution, extreme weather conditions and the urban heat-island effect). Green public spaces will become even more important as London densifies and fewer of us have access to our own private green fiefdoms.

10. Engage the public in the design and management of public space. The principle of public ownership is inherent in the concept of public space and most of London’s public realm belongs to the boroughs, who are in theory democratically accountable. But
there can be a big difference between theory and reality. Those responsible for our public realm should be looking for ways – beyond borough elections – to engage voters and users in its development and maintenance. Londoners already play a large role in shaping and running London’s public realm, especially its parks. But new developments, including new technologies, an ageing population and the neighbourhood planning movement, offer new opportunities.

**Challenges**

Following these principles won’t be easy. London’s population is growing fast and the city will need to grow to accommodate it. This will mean plenty of new development, as well as increased pressures on existing public realm.

The London Plan identifies some 40 ‘Opportunity Areas’ that offer extensive scope for regeneration and development across outer, inner and even central London (Tottenham Court Road is an Opportunity Area). Some of these represent major engineering challenges: but they all represent significant design, placemaking and public realm challenges too – these places won’t be turned from ‘opportunities’ into successes until they are full of busy streets, squares and parks.

Moreover, London faces issues not just about how it protects and develops London’s public space in the future, but also in how it treats public space now. I single out five issues in particular.

First, the dominance of the private car. Politicians are understandably wary of policies that can be presented as ‘anti-driver’ – car owners have swung many a borough election. But with congestion and air pollution now major political issues, it is surely time for politicians to be a bit bolder in at least exploring options for further discouraging private car use and ownership – including new approaches to congestion, pollution charging and greater support for car sharing.

A second challenge concerns London’s major roads. Most of the city’s large roads remain hostile places. The A501 (the Euston Road and its extensions) is a vital London thoroughfare, yet it is remarkably ugly, congested and dangerous. This is perhaps an extreme example, but London is full of unattractive and neglected A roads. Most of these would benefit
from densification, creating Paris-style avenues lined with mansion blocks and trees.

Third, we are still building too many modernist-style developments – buildings in space, not spaces between buildings. The journalist and conservationist Simon Jenkins likes to say that everyone pays homage to Jane Jacobs but no one actually follows her. When you look at a development like Nine Elms, you get his point. We can build to high densities without giving up on the London grammar of avenues, streets, mews and garden squares.

Fourth, our public sector is retrenching and is likely to be doing so for many years to come. Cuts are falling particularly heavily on city and borough government, and there is little doubt that our public realm is set to suffer. As much as possible, the public realm should be designed to look after itself – or to enable citizens to look after it with minimal oversight from the authorities.

The final challenge is the privatisation of public space. A large number of writers and campaigners have drawn attention to the trend for developers and landowners to wrest control of space that had once been or should be public. The London Assembly has written a good report on the issue. Many boroughs have responded to the criticism by establishing policies that prohibit (or at least discourage) gated developments, and place conditions on privately owned ‘public realm’. But with the sheer scale of development that London requires, and the dire pressures on local authority budgets, we need to remain vigilant in ensuring that developers and landowners don’t further erode our precious public life.

London has always been, and will always be, a city that not only accommodates change, but thrives on it. The ability of the public realm to adapt to changing demands and preferences is no exception. But at the heart of the flexibility of London’s public spaces is an appreciation of the contribution they make to city life, and the principles that underlie their success. Following these principles may well have its challenges, but it is precisely in these periods of intense change that the value of the public realm is realised.
Endnotes

The concept of ‘place’ comprises at least two main components: location and context. The first has often been taken as a proxy for how close or far away one is from the city centre. The second covers a multitude of different qualitative factors that it seems ought to be important in defining the way urban neighbourhoods function.

In this essay I argue that an essential component of placemaking lies in the way that urban space becomes meaningful to people, and so makes the world intelligible, creating the conditions in which we can act purposefully as members of society. In order to make this argument I review a body of recent work that has tried to uncover the way that urban placemaking and neighbourhood configuration contribute to the social life of cities, and how this might affect value.

The value of urban place

It is a truism that, aside from size, the value of a property is determined by location. Early theories in geography held that what mattered was distance from the city centre: however, a cursory review of the evidence suggests that the process must be more complex.

Cities tend not to be characterised by concentric rings of similar value. They often show a north-south (e.g. Manchester) or an east-west (London) division in values. Run-down inner city estates sit cheek by jowl with gentrified middle-class areas, and some of the most expensive residential streets are in the outer fringe of the suburbs. While one street in the city centre may be dominated by high-value retail, a turn of the corner is likely to be associated with a different retail mix at a lower rental, while yet another turn will take one into a completely different land-use class, and so into a different sub-market in property.
Two different drivers of value for property have generally been proposed. Either value is taken to be determined primarily by utilitarian factors, such as size of property, or distance to a market centre; alternatively, analysis of so-called ‘hedonic variables’ allows one to consider those factors that contribute to value based on human pleasure: the sunnier garden or the better view.

In general terms, neither approach has so far considered in any detail the street layout of urban neighbourhoods. This has recently been subject to several studies which make use of methods of spatial analysis to represent and quantify the network properties of the streets in a neighbourhood.

While we all understand intuitively the difference between ‘main streets’ and ‘back streets’, the idea that these properties might be generalised through formal description and analysis is relatively recent. By representing every street segment in a neighbourhood as a node in a network, connected to those street segments each links to, and weighting the strength of connection according to change of direction (the more straight ahead, the stronger the connection), the representation captures the geometry with enough detail to allow comparison of differently designed areas. This allows quantitative analysis to be used where previously only qualitative methods had been possible.

Alain Chiaradia and Bill Hillier, for example, investigated the value that might be associated with street network effects that could be shown to reduce or increase vulnerability to burglary. First they showed that there appears to be a systematic increase in crime vulnerability associated with certain types of street network configuration, and then they used Home Office data on the cost of crime to define the inherent value of neighbourhoods designed to reduce crime.¹

Hillier expanded considerably on this analysis to investigate economic factors in urban configuration.² He found that value of high streets is best correlated with measures of network ‘betweenness’, while that of residential property as measured by community tax band is best associated with ‘closeness centrality’. He suggested that this reflects the dependence of retail upon passing trade (something indexed by the degree to which a street segment lies on many different routes ‘between’ other origins and destinations in an area), and value of residence on
accessibility in the local area (indexed instead by how ‘close’ a street segment is to all others in an area).

An important element of the complexity of urban property markets depends upon the way that single sites may be subject to different markets for different land uses. In early geographic studies, a simplifying assumption was made that ‘as the crow flies’ distance to the CBD could account for the cost of transportation – of people from home to work, or of goods to a market – and that these in turn would account for the distribution of land uses in the city.

However, Laura Narvaez, in a recent comprehensive study of property markets in the city of Cardiff, introduces street networks and distance travelled on them into an analysis of these markets. Her analysis, far from showing the simple trade-offs assumed by economist William Alonso, found much more subtle and varied patterns.

More recently, Stephen Law’s hedonic analysis of London residential prices, including street network configuration as hedonic variables, found these to be implicated in markets, as Hillier had suggested, in terms of the local accessibility of a given location. However, he also found that distinct local sub-markets exist, many with estate agents’ names, and that sometimes these sub-market areas can be identified within the street network using a method of ‘community detection’ adapted from social network analysis. Community detection methods identify those nodes in a network that are more strongly interconnected amongst themselves than they are to surrounding nodes.

The concept of ‘place’

Place has taken on a new importance in discussions of urban value over recent years. Architects, urban designers and planners now style themselves as ‘placemakers’, while the ills of the anonymous modern city have been ascribed to a failure to create places that people find meaningful.

Despite its new popularity, the concept itself is complex and multifaceted. Melvin Webber described the importance of place in contrast to those aspects of society that seem to overcome space and allow a community to cohere at a distance across the “non-place urban realm”.

Environmental psychology describes ‘place attachment’ as an emotional tie experienced by individuals for their home or local neighbourhood.
Bill Hillier and colleagues proposed a mechanism through which the spatial and the social can be considered as a single phenomenon. As people move through and experience urban space, their movement gives rise to a probability of encounter with others. This, Hillier suggests, creates a “virtual community” which is only realised when co-presence leads to interaction, communication or transaction.

The probability of any given association between individuals or different categories of people depends first and foremost on their repeated movements through urban space, a product in turn of locations of different land uses, the configuration of the street network, the regularities of human daily life and the patterns of co-presence that all these create.

Place considered in this way can be seen at once to cover the individual, the socioeconomic and the physical/spatial construction of the city. The complexity of these associations is therefore intrinsic to the valuation of the urban realm, as are the ways in which they can be simplified enough to be learned and made meaningful to people.

I propose a possible process through which distributions of space and social function in cities could emerge over time, and suggest how this pattern can become meaningful. The process is intrinsically related to value, since value is established in a market and so captures the opinions of many different actors, each of whom assess the positive and negative externalities of any specific site for their own purposes. Amongst these are the decisions of other actors who, as neighbours and passersby, will produce positive or negative effects on the site in question.

The result of the operation of this kind of market over time is a distribution of land uses in which there is a high degree of spatial autocorrelation. In other words, the functional use of a building cannot be considered as completely independent from that of its neighbours, nor they from theirs in turn across a whole neighbourhood.

In this way, and in the absence of regulation such as land use planning controls, a market will evolve to distribute land uses in a way that takes advantage of the spatial affordances of the street network, such as local or large-scale accessibility, as well as the positive and negative externalities of neighbouring land uses. It is this set of correlations between spatial configuration, functional land use and patterns of traffic and occupancy, and their direct relationship to the social, cultural and
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economic processes which influence their evolution over time, which provides a basis for urban places to be thought of as meaningful.

If these processes lead to spatially correlated patterns, it should be possible to retrieve from the urban realm information about the social processes that produced it. It should also be possible, by learning these patterns of association, to predict the likelihood of other patterns: to gain information from the physical and spatial fabric of the city, for example, about the virtual community, and so to inform one’s own decisions as a social agent.

This process plays a central role in creating the conditions in which people have autonomy, and it is here that the real value of urban places lies. It lets the shopper, for example, predict where best to look for a specific class of goods; or the shop-owner predict where best to set up store to catch passing trade or benefit from the attractive effect of a cluster of similar shops.

When placemaking fails, the result is to interrupt the patterned relationships between different aspects of the urban environment. In doing so we reduce the urban realm to a pattern of meaningless associations, and so deny people the ability to act intentionally as social agents, depriving them of their right to self-determination. And this is, as Doyal and Gough argue, must be classed as the most fundamental of human rights.8

Endnotes


7. Doyal, L., & Gough, I. (1991). *A Theory of Human Need*. New York: The Guilford Press. Further information on this area of study may be found in the following works:


Talking architecture with strangers: why community engagement in development matters more than ever

Daisy Froud

For the past 16 years, I’ve spent a large proportion of my evenings and weekends standing in streets, car parks, libraries, churches, community halls and classrooms around the capital talking about architecture with strangers. In brief, I work in ‘community engagement’.

Sometimes conversations are positive, exploring different possible futures using models, scenarios, games and experiments. At other times they are tense. People voice concerns about the scale and rate of development, the impact on their lives or the perceived failure of “the Council” to attend to real local needs. But whatever the tone, the outcome – as long as findings are taken seriously – is always better than it would have been without this interaction.

And yet, in recent years, engagement has had an increasingly bad rap. Clients and architects bemoan the NIMBYish, narrow-minded, anti-development mindset of those who take part – labeled ‘usual suspects’ as if not to be trusted – and the compromised nature of outcomes. Participants express frustration at the ‘token’ or ‘sham’ nature of these exercises. I rarely start a project without someone bitterly saying: “This is just for show. It’s all a done deal.”

And I agree, if engagement continues to be practised in its most popular, insidious forms: (i) as PR to ‘sell’ a scheme; (ii) as well-intentioned pink fluffy activity happening in its own bubble, pacifying and entertaining while the serious business of delivery goes on elsewhere; or (iii) as mindless ‘Have Your Say’ Post-it opinion-gathering, positioning citizens
Talking architecture with strangers

as children whose task it is to voice a decontextualised view and then have a strop when this fails to make an impact.

Such approaches undermine the possibility of intelligent, citizen-led debate about the way in which we, the urban populace, ‘produce’ the built environment and guide the evolution of our city.

Engagement as politics
Popular engagement in the production of the built environment is a form of politics, and can only be carried out effectively if emphatically understood, designed and managed as such. Good community engagement, perhaps better understood as ‘citizen participation’, is the process of using appropriate methods and tools to explore, negotiate and (importantly) make accountable the question of “Who gets what, when, how?” – to use political scientist Harold Laswell’s famous definition of politics.

These politics play out at the level of the project itself, in the decisions that are taken in the shaping of a proposal, whether masterplanning a district, inserting a new block in an existing neighbourhood, or determining whether – and how – to redevelop an existing housing estate. But through the cumulative decision-making impact of multiple projects, they also play out – and this is even more important to acknowledge – at the level of the neighbourhood and then of the city itself. Development projects have political, social and economic repercussions beyond their ‘red lines’. Participants inevitably bring that understanding with them to engagement events.

Engagement and the planning system
To an extent, decisions about the city’s built environment are taken through the policy aspects, and then implemented through the development control aspects, of the planning system – a pillar of our established system of representative democracy. Since the Skeffington Report of 1969, the public has the opportunity to inform that policy, as well as to comment on, and object to, applications once submitted (and, in the case of major schemes, during the design stage as well).

So why, one might ask, should one want to bring more complication and debate into it? The voice of ‘the people’ is already fairly represented.
The first response is well rehearsed. Setting aside ethical or political considerations, it is now generally accepted that (i) users or inhabitants have particular experience or knowledge that cannot be replicated by outside ‘experts’, leading to better more locally-specific placemaking, and that (ii) involvement in the production of the built environment creates beneficial ‘ownership’ of outcomes – the ‘good citizen’ argument – leading to more sustainable placemaking.

Another common argument is that although the planning system may work well in principle, in practice things are less satisfactory. Local authorities do not currently have the resources to really consider the nuanced implications of possible developments in specific areas, on specific sites, or to engage with the granular detail of existing places.

The system is also not responsive enough to the capital’s pace of change. Innovations in neighbourhood planning (a form of strategic localised community engagement led by the community itself and introduced by the 2011 Localism Act), and ‘big’ or ‘digital’ data, may help meet these challenges. But neither, as yet, are well established or, in the case of the former, adequately resourced.

**Engagement as urban democracy**

Far more important are the political and ethical arguments:

1. **Community engagement events**, done well, are some of the few ‘official’ places, in London in 2017, where active popular participation in debate and deliberation about the future of the city takes place in an accessible way and – at the level of the project at least – can have some direct impact. They need to be supported as such.

   We have a lack of engaging political fora available to us as citizens, particularly as resources to fund community councils or similar recede, leading people to turn to direct action (not a bad thing, but one that can trouble governments) or disillusionment and apathy instead.

   And yet, in my work, I encounter increasing desire for such spaces. People know or sense that a healthy democracy needs to be *practised*, not just assumed, to allow it to stay alive and continue to evolve, and that evolving democracy needs to be negotiated and tested in public spaces. And people want to make use of the new types and quantities
of information, knowledge and connectivity at their disposal to participate in it.

2. **Citizens have a “right to the city”** and to make the city… Philosopher-sociologist Henri Lefebvre argues that those who permanently inhabit a city, and who use and produce its spaces through their activity and labour on a daily basis, no matter their origin, have more rights to participate in decisions about its ongoing development than those who simply own land or property there – or who, as an ‘Olympian’ jet set, glide through periodically.¹

Lefebvre is adamant that the ‘right to the city’ is not just about the right to be in the city and not be displaced to the edges, but the right to continue to shape the city – to ‘appropriate’ its spaces – and to physically ‘enjoy’ it, both through one’s everyday life and culture, and through political activity.

3. … **And it is time they were supported in doing so**, to the benefit of the city (understood as the sum of its people and not the size of its coffers), and to the benefit of a functioning, evolving democracy.

Conversations I have every day suggest that people do not feel adequately represented by the current system of decision-making about the city or, often, the values that appear to underpin it. Engagement at project level becomes an opportunity to voice that. For what is the point in pooling your knowledge – the ‘better places’ argument – if, in the long run, you, your community or your children will be unable to afford to live in the better place that is created? In recent years, I have witnessed a shift in the questions asked, combined with refusal to accept the status quo. London’s citizens – and not just the ‘usual suspects’ – actively want to discuss the challenges that the city faces, and to deliberate together.

It can be bewildering when debate about capital-wide development overruns your modest event, spilling well beyond the red line of the site boundary. But it’s also thrilling. And necessary.

**Engagement with questions of value**

On the whole, those raising difficult questions at events look at issues holistically and long-term. They are thinking about how change happens
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and the localised implications. They don’t necessarily have the right answers – none of us do, individually, however ‘expert’ we are – or agree with each other about what needs to happen, but they are asking the right questions.

Underlying that questioning is a huge ambiguity about which values – and whose interests – are driving London’s evolution. There is a notable vagueness about this in documents such as The London Plan, the capital’s overarching spatial strategy. It states repeatedly, for example, the reassuring objective of meeting the “needs and aspirations” of “all Londoners”. At the same time, it presents economic growth as a primary objective. Two assumptions appear implicit: (i) that those aims are compatible and that (ii) there is no positive alternative to growth. Both could be challenged.

As geographer Doreen Massey notes, the real challenge we face in London is not the commonly cited one that “London is a successful city… but there are still great areas of poverty and exclusion”, but rather that “London is a successful city and partly as a result of the terms of that success there are still great areas of poverty and exclusion”.

Based on the current trajectory, with rising land values, less and less genuinely affordable housing, and policies such as the Bedroom Tax, many people who are currently Londoners might not be so in five years time – and not out of choice. London’s citizens may not couch their concerns in the same language as Massey, but they have a sense that something is out of joint.

Engagement as testbed

Good community engagement not only makes space for problems with the current system to be articulated, but – more importantly – offers a testing ground for a different way of doing politics, one with potential implications not just for the democracy of development, but for that of the city. One that is more deliberative and participative, that learns and questions from the bottom up, and that uses intelligent mechanisms to evaluate and debate future scenarios.

This is not about replacing our current representative democracy, as epitomised by the planning system (for now anyway…) but offering a complement to it. Not every citizen has the time or interest to be
involved in every decision. And there will always be a need, in a pro-
gressive society, to think about the “right to the city” of those who are
not yet here: the unborn, or future migrants. This requires an interplay
between local, city-wide and national planning, which perhaps inevitably
leads to some kind of delegate structure, with decision-making flowing
upwards and downwards.

However, good engagement practice, particularly in its emphasis
on accountability of decision-making structures and processes (what
decisions have already been taken, will need to be taken, when, by
whom, and on what basis), has much to offer as an exemplar for a
reinvigorated approach to spatial politics, and to politics more broadly.
As a minimum, it can generate vital data to inform deliberative, evi-
dence-based and visibly ‘fair’ decision-making either by community
delegates or by those holding ultimate decision-making power. More
ambitiously, it can suggest quite different models of plan-making and
governance, both at the level of the project and at that of the city.

Models of engagement
So, what forms might those models take?

A different kind of London Plan?
Good engagement can generate good evidence-based plans through
collaborative processes, replacing traditional consultation and lobbying
as the dominant means of inputting to policy. The work of ‘informal
alliance’ Just Space is inspiring here, holding community conferences
to “develop ideas about what a London Plan would be like if it were to
prioritise — or at least protect — the interests of its citizens, its environ-
ment and the real economies in which we meet each other’s needs.”

The GLA’s current A City For All Londoners workshop and forum
activity is an interesting, if modest, step in the right direction. Future
plan-making could begin with a proactive, collaborative, fully public
enquiry into what London is, who it is for, what it could be, and how
we might get there.

From agreed values, as opposed to simply ‘objectives’, could come
priorities and policies, commitments and pledges. Decisions and priori-
ties could be negotiated and bargained between different interest groups,
revealing and celebrating the workings and fault lines of democracy. This would lead to outcomes that, although not necessarily pleasing everyone in every aspect, could be seen to be reasoned and fair, based on an explicitly articulated value system.

Experiments with Popular Planning?
The Popular Planning Unit (PPU) was an early 1980s experiment, led by the Greater London Council (GLC). It tried to rebalance the relationship between strategic economic planning and localised decision-making, and to make explicit the links between economic and spatial development.

Supported and resourced (but not directed) by public servants at the GLC, communities would draw on “practical and tacit knowledge” acquired through lived experience (work, home, community, relationships) in order to debate and determine for themselves the direction of change affecting them. This was tested most explicitly in the preparation of a “People’s Plan” for the post-industrial Docklands, countering the wholesale redevelopment mooted by central government. Although it lost at the public enquiry stage, it remains significant for its attempt to restructure relationships between citizens, politicians and experts.

Or… look to Ecuador?
In 2007, Ecuador, a whole country, did something fascinating. It started to draw up a National Plan for Good Living, now in its second 2013–2017 iteration. This document, produced in participation with its population, rejects the dominant development model (“three decades of neoliberalism”) and replaces it with a set of values about sustainable wellbeing and interconnectedness drawn partly from the country’s indigenous past.

Alongside the plan’s ongoing evolution runs a research project that seeks to “remake the roots of Ecuador’s economy, setting off a transition into a society of free and open knowledge”. The idea is that the country will transition towards an “open commons knowledge-based” or “good knowledge” society, supporting it in its move away from “mindless accumulative economic growth”?
**Engagement with the future**

It is arguable that, despite many statements of intent, little has really changed since 1947, when our current planning system – regarding who takes decisions, and how, about the city’s evolution – fundamentally came into being. This has consistently been determined on behalf of the wider populace by an elite, whether aristocratic, technocratic, political or economic. Money, and traditional forms of knowledge and power, talk.

One might even argue that, compared to 1947, the democratic power of the ‘public interest’ has been reduced within spatial decision-making. ‘Confidentiality’ on key aspects of development projects is now a norm for major public sector regeneration schemes – due to reliance on private sector partners who do not wish to put the details of financing on display, or to the imperatives of risk management.

And yet, while this endures, and while participation in traditional representative democracy may have dropped, the British public in general – as the 2006 Joseph Rowntree Trust Power Enquiry reported – is better educated, less deferential, more demanding and exposed to a broader range of cultural influences. This still-relevant investigation asserts that: “When participation meets the expectations of today’s citizen, those citizens will get involved.”

If those of us who govern truly want to represent the interests of all of the rest of us, then there is no excuse not to get on with it, and to draw on the intelligent models we have for inspiration.

Endnotes

4. See www.london.gov.uk/get-involved/have-your-say/all-consultations/city-all-londoners


Park life: London 2012 and lessons in placemaking

Neale Coleman

For all of us working on delivering the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the triumphant Sydney 2000 was our exemplar. So in September 2012, as exhausted teams turned their attention to Park reopening and legacy development, it was a big boost to read the judgements from Australia. From the Sydney Morning Herald:

“London, you didn’t half do a decent job. These Olympics had Sydney’s vibrancy, Athens’s panache, Beijing’s efficiency, and added British know-how and drollery […] They were superbly organised. The Olympic Park’s setting, in one of Britain’s poorest boroughs, proved inspired. Some Olympic sites become wasteland after the Games. This one began as wasteland and is now full of possibilities.”

In the colder light of 2016, as the memory of the brilliant Games recedes, we can start to see what is being done to realise those wider possibilities – creating a new, connected London district out of what had been an impenetrable maze of power lines, canals, railway sidings and car breakers’ yards. Judgements will inevitably be contested and mixed, but there is a good story to tell.

The Park reopened on time, a year after the Games – a first. The Aquatic Centre, Copper Box and Velodrome are packed with community and elite users. The long and troubled saga of securing legacy uses for the Stadium – always the most difficult venue, as Beijing, Athens, Sydney and Barcelona can testify – has concluded with 50,000 watching Premier League football, the 2017 World Athletics Championships and the Paralympic Championships, promising to rekindle the spirit of 2012 in the summer.

That other legacy conundrum, the Media and Broadcast Centre, is now full of amazing tenants and uses: BT Sport’s huge studios;
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Loughborough in London, home to 1,000 postgraduate students; the biggest dance studios in Europe run by the world’s greatest choreographer, Wayne McGregor; University College London’s latest work on robotics; and now Here East, a new 70,000 sq ft tech innovation centre.

Two more universities are proposing big campuses: UCL are expanding east out of Bloomsbury and the London Fashion College are planning to bring all London’s fashion colleges together at Stratford. Discussions with Sadler’s Wells and the Victoria and Albert Museum on bringing their culture offer to the Park are also advanced.

The former Olympic Village is now home for more than 2,800 households as East Village, with thousands more affordable and market homes being built in four new neighbourhoods around the Park. Meanwhile, between the buzz of Westfield and the open spaces of the Park, the International Quarter is being built out as a new business district, with headquarters buildings for Transport for London and the Financial Conduct Authority. These will offer the first 5,000 new jobs of a final total of more than 25,000.

Making plans happen

Can London 2012 offer lessons for other placemaking, development and regeneration projects? In many ways London 2012 was unique – in scale, in scope and in the sense of national commitment. But the project and its evaluations have highlighted the importance of robust delivery mechanisms, strong public sector partnerships and, above all, the critical role that people play in creating successful places.

Looking back at evaluations of London 2012 – from the Institute for Government’s January 2013 report¹ to the ‘Learning Legacy’ reports prepared by the London 2012 team² – it’s striking how much focus there is on people, relationships, transparency and trust. The IfG report quotes David Higgins, the ODA Chief Executive: “The most important thing was never physical things: the most important thing was always people.” Paul Deighton, the Chief Executive of LOCOG: “Projects go well because of the people, not because of the structures.” Seb Coe: ”It’s really about the ability of the people in those organisations to be open and honest and to have relationships that work, and they did in large part.”
Park life: London 2012 and lessons in placemaking

This may seem obvious, but it is a critical lesson for leaders and leadership teams about priorities and what to put first every day.

The people who drove the project forwards were supported by strong institutional and partnership structures. One of the most obvious successes of the project was the creation (and subsequent performance) of the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) as an arm’s-length statutory body to deliver the infrastructure and venues for the Games.

The powers given to the ODA through the London Olympic and Paralympic Games Act were vital for the delivery of the Olympic Park. Creating the right special-purpose vehicle with focus, clear objectives, responsibility and limitations on day-to-day political interference is often a critical factor in the success of large projects – provided of course that the body has the necessary powers to deliver.

These days there is no single best model to recommend. However, local authorities are breaking new ground in long-term development partnerships with the private sector, and new models of urban regeneration and economic development company (such as the Birmingham Curzon URC and Solihull Urban Growth Company – both established to plan and deliver regeneration around the HS2 stations in Birmingham). The forthcoming mayoral election in the West Midlands may well lead to them morphing into Mayoral Development Corporations in the same way that the Olympic Park Legacy Company became the London Legacy Development Corporation.

Standing behind the ODA was a robust mechanism for political oversight, the Olympic Board. This brought together the Secretary of State, the Mayor of London, and the heads of the LOCOG and the British Olympic Association to review progress and thrash out some of the genuinely difficult issues on scope, budget and timescale. The fact that these arrangements – and the legacy development corporation that succeeded them – have survived under three different Mayors and four different Prime Ministers is a testament to the shared will to make it work, and the understanding that big projects cannot be delivered in single electoral cycles.

**Land and housing**

The Games were only made possible through one of the most complex public land assembly tasks ever undertaken: there was a compulsory
purchase order (CPO) to manage, advice on relocations and the usual negotiations over price and compensation. Major issues included the relocation of travellers, allotment holders and three major bus garages. To the great credit of the London Development Agency (LDA) team that led this work, it was completed in time to allow the ODA to get on site early in 2007 – laying the foundation for both Games and legacy.

Few things cause more problems for major projects in London today than issues with land assembly, land banking and land trading. The complexity of CPO processes and the frequent delays – both in getting inquiries underway and in getting Ministerial decisions taken – are big barriers. The Olympic project shows it does not have to be like that. The Olympic CPO was made in November 2005 and, despite its scale and complexity, had been through inquiry and confirmed by December 2006. It should be a priority for national and London government to resource and support CPOs (and their associated decision-making) to make land assembly easier and quicker for local authorities.

The Olympics also broke new ground in direct public-sector delivery of new housing and new affordable housing. Following the crash in capital and property markets in 2008, the plans for private sector delivery of the Olympic Village had to be abandoned. The project to house 17,000 athletes at Games time and provide 2,800 homes in legacy was nationalised, with the ODA taking the development risk.

This has had good outcomes, enabling the project to go ahead during the worst financial crisis for a generation, when major projects were stalling across London. The development now known as East Village has won several awards for the quality of its design and management. Half the homes have been delivered at below market rent or as shared ownership properties. The private housing is now the biggest Build to Rent scheme in London and again has broken new ground: no fees, no agents, high-quality on-site management, and a choice of one-, two- or three-year leases with resident-only break clauses and rent rises limited to CPI. As one housing expert said: “That many homes have never been delivered that fast in my lifetime.”

It may be hard to match that pace, but the public sector should be working more with partners to build, market and manage a mix of market and sub-market homes for rent – especially where public land
is involved. Government is supportive, and the latest Supplementary Planning Guidance from the Mayor of London provides a strong framework for existing and new private players in the market to follow suit and overcome some of the barriers to delivery within the traditional housebuilder model.

**People, education and jobs**

It is people who are today remaking Stratford and the Olympic Park. One of the striking features of the ongoing regeneration and economic progress around Stratford is the critical role of education and higher education developments. An early partnership between Newham Council and Birkbeck led to the creation of a new dedicated campus next to Theatre Royal, Stratford. This has increased the local uptake of higher education – not just in Stratford, but also at Birkbeck’s original home in Bloomsbury. A similar Birkbeck initiative has now started as part of the regeneration plans for Tottenham.

The Newham-Birkbeck partnership can be seen as blazing a trail. Autumn 2016 saw the exciting launch of Loughborough in London in the former Media and Broadcast Centre, supporting 1,000 postgraduate students, partnering with local schools, offering a bursary scheme for local people, and bringing new life and activity to the area.

And there’s more: UCL, which has already taken space in Here East, will open a new campus from 2019–20 in the Olympic Park, covering 11 acres and providing 125,000 sq m of space. The University of the Arts’ London College of Fashion will take up a 35,000 sq m site in the Park – a fantastic boost for economic development and east London’s historic strengths in the fashion industry.

It is a marker of success that, in around 10 years, Stratford will have gone from having no universities to having four – with all that this means for jobs, innovation, reputation and opportunity locally.

However, the education story from the Olympics and Stratford is not just about higher education. Alongside the Olympic Village built for the Games stands the Chobham Academy, a new all-through school rated outstanding by Ofsted and whose first A Level results this year saw three-quarters of students getting A*–Cs. In September 2016, with support from Hackney Council, Mossbourne Riverside Academy
opened next to Here East, supporting the successful development of the next legacy neighbourhoods at Eastwick and Sweetwater. Work has now started on another all-through school, the Bobby Moore Academy, right next to the Olympic Stadium.

Getting education provision in place at the same time as new neighbourhoods are developed – and using it to benefit existing communities as well as newcomers – is fundamental to placemaking. Rapid economic change dictates that a focus on education, learning and innovation should be at the heart of all similar projects.

From the start, the London 2012 project has had a keen focus on employment and skill development opportunities for local people. Real commitment and delivery in this area is vital – particularly in overcoming scepticism and cynicism about whether change and development have anything to offer local people.

The local authorities in the area, with Newham at the fore, established a joint job brokerage service to support recruitment of the LOCOG contractor workforce at Games time. Some 20,150 previously workless Londoners secured Games-time employment, of which up to around 15,000 were estimated to have been secured via the brokerage.

Similar successes were achieved by Newham, working in partnership with Westfield, in creating a specialist retail academy which recruited more than 2,000 previously workless local people to the new stores at Westfield Stratford; and by the ODA and LLDC in outperforming all previous similar projects in recruiting and upskilling local people for construction opportunities in the Olympic Park.

A critical element in the success of all these initiatives has been a strong partnership with employers and the supply chain. The employment and upskilling of local people was not seen as a benevolent charitable endeavour but a partnership piece of workforce planning, forecasting and training that equipped local people with the range of skills employers need. The Legacy Corporation has ensured that a very high percentage of all those working in the legacy venues were recruited locally, but it has also developed digital apprenticeship programmes with Here East employers, and worked with the V&A Museum to enable a local candidate to access its prestigious Assistant Curator Development Programme.
Park life: London 2012 and lessons in placemaking

Everyone currently involved in placemaking and regeneration would emphasise that the field is now all about people, not just place; they also recognise the dilemma of trying to ensure that increases in land value and other changes do not marginalise or, in some cases, displace existing residents. Public authorities will be expecting their development plans and their private sector partners to demonstrate real social impact, to consider people-focused outcomes, and to help communities benefit from investments in place. That will mean they need to be still smarter with their procurement approaches, challenging the private sector to demonstrate innovation, and to commit to contracts that penalise a failure to deliver the social outcomes and impact specified.

Endnotes
Finding the beauty in bureaucracy: public service and planning

Finn Williams

My corporate induction at Croydon Council was also my introduction to the meaning of public service. For the icebreaker activity, one of my new colleagues asked what I’d been doing before, and I explained that I’d been working for an architecture practice. “It must be hard being an architect in a recession,” she replied, as if to say “…he can’t be a very good architect if he’s ended up at Croydon Council.” When she asked where I commuted from, I answered Hackney. Her look of commiseration turned to pity. I could tell she was thinking “…he couldn’t even get a job at Hackney Council.”

That was when I realised that public service had gone from being seen as a privilege, to a last resort. It was somehow unthinkable to my colleague that I’d chosen to work for Croydon Council above anywhere else. Or that I had given up working for some of the best architecture practices in Europe because I was more interested in some idealistic notion of the public good. That moment made me wonder why the public sector no longer seemed to attract the most talented and ambitious architects, planners and urban designers; what impact this was having on the built environment; and how to turn public service into something to be proud of again.

Decline and fall of the public planner

It wasn’t always the case. From the foundation of the London County Council (LCC) in 1889 until the decision was taken to dissolve the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1983, many of London’s leading architects and planners worked for the public, often under the wing of
Finding the beauty in bureaucracy: public service and planning

less well-known but influential civil servants. Thomas Blashill, the first Superintending Architect of the LCC, brought in a group of architects in their 20s straight from the Architectural Association, including Owen Fleming, who went on to design the Boundary Estate. According to Fleming, this group were driven by the belief that “architecture should not be for the rich alone” and showed “an indifference to fatigue when the public interests were involved”.

The same motivations were shared by a generation of architects and planners who joined the public sector after the Second World War. Sydney Cook, Camden’s first Borough Architect, created the conditions for young architects – including Gordon Benson, Alan Forsyth, Neave Brown and Peter Tabori – to build bold and innovative social housing in the late 1960s and early 70s.

At the same time Ted Hollamby, who had worked at the LCC under Leslie Martin, built a team of over 750 architects, planners and construction workers at the London Borough of Lambeth, including exceptional designers like George Finch and Kate Mackintosh. Like Fleming, Hollamby believed “architecture should be for the people, ordinary people.” But already by 1974, he was noticing the tendency for architects “to work for business and lucrative contracts rather than local government”.

The experiments of these public works departments did not always succeed. And when they failed, they failed on a large scale. The higher-profile problems were often the result of cheap and quick construction methods, underinvestment in management and maintenance, or socioeconomic factors beyond the control of designers – but they brought confidence in public planning down with them. It is only with the distance of time that the legacy of these public architects and planners is starting to be re-evaluated by writers like Owen Hatherley and John Grindrod, films like Utopia London, blogs such as Municipal Dreams, and even estate agents like The Modern House.

In 2012, the architect Rem Koolhaas gave over a room at the Venice Architecture Biennale to exhibit the “refreshingly modern and innovative” achievements of the “faceless bureaucrats” who worked as public servants in the 1960s and 70s. The catalogue laments that “In the age of the ‘starchitect’, the idea of suspending the pursuit of a private practice in favour of a shared ideology seems remote and untenable.”
FIG. 1 **Planning capacity vs housing delivery**

### 2010–11

- Net borough investment per head in planning and development
- Housing completions

![Map showing planning capacity vs housing delivery in 2010–11](image)

### 2015–16

- Net borough investment per head in planning and development
- London Plan housing targets

![Map showing planning capacity vs housing delivery in 2015–16](image)

40 years ago, a top architecture or planning graduate would have been as likely to go into public service as private practice. In 1976, 49 per cent of all architects in the UK worked for the public sector. Today it is 0.9 per cent, and only 0.2 per cent in London.

Of course this is only one measure of the public sector’s capacity, but it is a telling indicator of a paradigm shift away from public sector delivery towards an increasing reliance on commissioning the private sector. As a result, working in local government lost the attraction of hands-on experience, experimentation and learning from doing. It became less important for public servants to come up with new ideas if others would be delivering them.

Over the same period the powerful and wide-ranging roles of the Architect-Planner, Borough Architect and Chief Planner gradually sub-divided into silos in the cause of professionalisation and efficiency. The agency that used to be afforded to the Town Planner is now fragmented between officers specialising in Development Management, Planning Policy, Placemaking, Conservation, Regeneration, Housing, Sustainability, Building Control and Enforcement. This process has mirrored a wider disciplinary drift, where fields that were previously integrated such as planning, surveying, architecture, landscape and urban design have drifted not only apart but into conflict with each other.

The more prescriptive job descriptions that make up a local authority planning department today are each vital in their own right, but ultimately limiting if the description is the only thing you do. They inevitably result in each specialist taking a more blinkered approach, which makes thinking holistically and planning proactively an extraordinarily complex task of coordination. In this context it’s not surprising that almost 1 in 5 public sector planners are planning to leave the profession in the next 12 months (almost double the proportion in the private sector); the most common reasons are “dissatisfaction with the nature of the job” and “excessive workloads”.

It would be easy to blame the deep and widening skills gap in planning on a lack of resources as a result of austerity measures – and easy to see increasing planning fees as the solution. But the reasons run deeper. A skills gap has been flagged up in reports since the mid-90s, and even in 2008 the Communities and Local Government Committee concluded
that “Perhaps the most surprising, and frustrating, point to arise repeatedly from this inquiry is the fact that labour and skills shortages in planning are so unsurprising. They have been evident for well over a decade but review after review, report after report, recommendation after recommendation have not resulted in their reduction. This must change.”

It will only change by rethinking the nature of the job, and even the role of the public sector in planning.

**A systemic skills gap**

The skills gap may be longstanding, but the twin pressures of an increasing need to deliver homes at a time of decreasing local government resources have taken it to new extremes. In the last five years, net local authority spending on planning and development in London has fallen from £259m to £148m, a reduction of nearly 60 per cent. That’s more than any other council service.

**FIG. 2 Planning skills required by London boroughs**

Source: GLA, *Planning & Regeneration Capacity Survey 2016*
At the same time, we need to be delivering more than double the number of homes we were building five years ago. A lack of planning capacity is now seriously constraining delivery of both the quantity and quality of homes and growth.

Interestingly, the loudest calls for more investment in public planning are coming from the private sector. A recent survey of housebuilders identified providing additional resources to local authority planning departments as the single most important policy measure to boost housing supply. A lack of council resources is preventing good planning.

And there is strong evidence that developers are willing to pay more to build local authority capacity if it helps improve the planning process. The narrative supporting deregulation of the planning system has presented it as a barrier to growth. But these developers are calling for more planning, not less.

Local authorities recognise that delivering economic growth demands a proportionate growth of their planning capacity. But a lack of funding and uncertainty over budgets is preventing strategic resource planning. Even where they do have the funding to recruit additional staff, many councils struggle with one-size-fits-all recruitment processes, and are having problems finding talented planners.

By far the biggest barrier to London boroughs meeting their capacity needs is the difficulty in attracting appropriately qualified or skilled candidates. Beyond London, the situation is arguably worse. Local authorities in the East of England region spent approximately £700,000 advertising for planning staff last year, and still have over 100 planning vacancies.

Given the difficulties of building permanent in-house capacity, skills gaps in planning departments are often patched up using a series of short-term measures. These range from fixed-term contracts funded through Planning Performance Agreements, to an increasing reliance on external consultants and agency staff, and an expansion of Design Review as an alternative to in-house urban design expertise.
These are necessary and urgent solutions, but over the longer term they will only exacerbate the problem. The net result is a gradual erosion of local skills, knowledge, accountability, and sense of public service.

**FIG. 3 Barriers to boroughs meeting their planning capacity needs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty attracting appropriate candidates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty in setting appropriate pay scales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty over funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of available funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints of recruitment processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties retaining staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity of recruitment processes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: GLA, *Planning & Regeneration Capacity Survey 2016*

**FIG. 4 How boroughs currently meet their planning capacity needs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Procuring external consultants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training for existing staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External appointments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal redeployment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from external partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsourcing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public sector secondments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: GLA, *Planning & Regeneration Capacity Survey 2016*
Finding the beauty in bureaucracy: public service and planning

The assumption behind each of these measures is that the reputation of public sector planning is damaged beyond repair – that attracting the right people relies on the job not being ‘public sector’, or not being ‘planning’. There is a danger that this reinforces the misconception that public planning is somehow boring, and that this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Perhaps the answer isn’t to move further away from the original idea of planning, but to rediscover and redefine it.

Ask some of the leading planners working in local government, and they say that with the right conditions the job is more interesting and challenging than anything they came across in private practice. Sripriya Sudhakar, who worked for a number of high-profile planning consultancies before choosing to join the public sector, told us: “I’ve honestly not had a single boring day in the seven years I’ve been at Tower Hamlets.”

According to Vincent Lacovara, a Team Leader in Croydon Council’s Spatial Planning Service: “It’s easy to write off planning conditions or procurement exercises as bureaucracy, but in the right context, none of this is boring. A good planner will see crafting a S106 clause as a crucial part of designing a better place.” Rather than denying these aspects of the job, we need to be attracting people who can find the beauty in bureaucracy.

A new generation of public servants

There are signs that a new generation of architects, urban designers, planners – and practitioners who don’t fit comfortably into any of these categories – are more receptive to the idea of public service. Young practices like Assemble, DK-CM and We Made That are at the head of a field of cross-disciplinary designers who are interested in doing socially engaged projects for the public good.

The architecture and planning students I teach are attracted by the idea of more ethical work, but also frustrated by their experiences of profit-driven development in private practice. Joseph Zeal-Henry, a recent graduate of Cass Cities at London Metropolitan University, comments: “As an architect I sleep better at night if I have a job where I can contribute positively to the city I was born in and live in.”

This generation is already working its way into local government, and finding a natural fit with progressive councils that recognise the public sector has to take a more proactive and entrepreneurial approach.
Making good – shaping places for people

to planning. Tobias Goevert is the head of the new Regeneration Unit at Harrow Council, which has brought in extraordinarily talented staff, mainly from the private sector. He explains that the drivers for establishing the unit were partly political will to intervene directly where the market is failing to deliver, and partly a recognition of “the need to generate more stable revenue income in the context of the sea change in government funding… Harrow Regeneration Unit brings regeneration, planning, design, development, construction and delivery under one roof. We’re not so much Borough Architects as Borough Developers.”

Croydon Council has created the first new in-house architects department in decades to support their wholly owned development company, Brick by Brick, to build over 1,000 homes on sites across the borough. The team is led by Chloe Phelps, who was shortlisted for Emerging Woman Architect of the Year.

“The Design & Feasibility Team was set up to really embed creativity, quality and innovation at the heart of our new projects… The ethos is similar to the previous generation of council architects departments in that we seek to create open-minded, technologically savvy, socially relevant architecture. It will be different in the way that we intend to stay small, nimble and efficient.”

The new generation isn’t only young people. In 2016, Ken Rorrison retired from award-winning architects Henley Halebrown Rorrison after 21 years as a director, to explore the profession from another perspective. He decided to rejoin Hackney Council as Design Manager across their housing and regeneration programmes, 34 years after working for Hackney Council Architects Department as a year-out job.

“There was a romantic side to my career coming full circle, but I was also attracted by joining a motivated team, doing good work, with strong political support… There’s a mindset that there’s more freedom in the private sector, which isn’t true. But it’s going to take council-led work winning awards and being published to rebuild the cachet of working for the public sector as something people want to do.”

Redefining public planning

The new administration at City Hall sees good public planning as essential to create the conditions for good growth. The team brings direct
Finding the beauty in bureaucracy: public service and planning

experience of leading exemplary council-led delivery programmes, and understands the crucial role borough officers have to engage communities, coordinate investment, shape development and strengthen the character of places.

That is why Jules Pipe is chairing an advisory group to help establish a new initiative to build local authority planning capacity: Public Practice. Membership of the advisory group crosses sectors and disciplines, and includes representation from the wider South East. It is overseeing production of a business plan, co-funded by the GLA, Local Government Association (LGA) and East of England LGA, to create a ‘Teach First for planning’.

**FIG. 5 Potential measures to build borough planning capacity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Additional training for existing staff</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer networking and sharing best practice</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondments pool of highly skilled officers</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheaper and better quality agency offer</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for coordination of edge-of-borough areas</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simpler public sector recruitment</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondment of GLA staff</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost free design review</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate placement scheme</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More direct support from GLA staff</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing staff with other boroughs</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: GLA, *Planning & Regeneration Capacity Survey 2016*

Public Practice will offer local authorities hand-picked, exceptionally talented planning practitioners for year-long placements at affordable rates. The practitioners will be given the opportunity to work in strategic roles within authorities under flexible conditions, alongside a prestigious programme of collective research and learning. This programme will be
Making good – shaping places for people

cross-subsidised by public- and private-sector supporters interested in investing in public-sector planning capacity, and improving the certainty, quality and speed of development.

Tony Pidgley, a member of the advisory group, sees it as “a great opportunity to change the culture of planning from a regulatory function to something that makes things happen and makes a difference”.

For Lord Kerslake, also on the advisory group, “This is not about resurrecting old models of public practice, but reinvigorating what it is to be a planner.”

London already has a wealth of talent in the built environment: it is just not evenly distributed. This is holding the whole industry back from creating better places. The Public Practice initiative will not be able to close the skills gap alone, but it’s one practical way of harnessing London’s talent and starting to make an immediate difference.

Endnotes

2. Municipal Dreams (ibid).
5. Taken from the ARB Architects’ Register, 20 (Retrieved from: www.architects-register.org.uk/).
14. This and all subsequent quotes are from GLA user-centred research, 2016.
Successful design is as much about providing an enjoyable experience as it is about aesthetics. The experience of our buildings and places speaks to our national identity: it says something about who we are and what we are good at. As we move into a decade where infrastructure is the one area in which investment is likely to be made, it is important that design and identity-fuelled aesthetics are integral to that plan.

For big infrastructure projects to work at a local level, they should engender national pride and be matched by a sense of local ownership. They need to be fit for purpose and sensitive to their context, and should, above all, be designed for the needs of the future.

As an industry, we have the ability – and the expertise – to design high-quality, sustainable buildings and masterplan them into great places, integrating community activities and shared spaces for everyone.

By ‘masterplan’, I do not just mean a comprehensive plan of the physical manifestation of a place – buildings, roads, and bridges: I also mean our attitude towards how the world works, our place in it, and how that is embodied in the things we build. Imagination needs to be at the heart of our thinking, moving towards a healthier, more compassionate and greener philosophy than before. But it’s not something we can do on our own. It is my experience that only a combined effort of the greatest creative thinkers can make it possible to rethink our cities and large infrastructure projects, so that a connection between people, place and the passage of time can be achieved. The bringing together of talented individuals who have the skill to imagine the future is the key to enabling good design – through a ‘collective’ design champion.
What is a design champion?
A design champion is classically seen as an individual, a single person with passion, ability and – most importantly – a mandate to take responsibility for the design quality throughout a project. Indeed, without this leadership and enthusiasm, projects such as the London Olympics, the Jubilee Line extension and Crossrail 1 would never have achieved their outstanding level of architecture and design excellence.

Examples like these demonstrate how individuals have changed the course of a project through their ability to promote the benefits of good design; to negotiate the necessary funding and timescales to achieve it; to coordinate efforts of cooperation between all stakeholders; to ensure the process promotes the delivery of high-quality design; and to make a strong defence for design when confronted by difficult decisions. These achievements are no small feat.

If an individual can transform the quality of design to such an extent, just imagine what the combined thinking of a collection of individuals can achieve. This was the thought process that led CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) to set up the first ‘design panel’ over a decade ago. With the sole purpose of offering advice and critical support to the Building Schools for the Future programme, CABE gathered together a group of architects and designers to peer-review the work of the architects designing the schools. The process of a group of peers critiquing projects and offering advice and support was responsible for improving many of the resulting school projects. Since then, design panels have grown into a national movement and have been responsible for improving our built environment for over a decade.

In hindsight, it is surprising that this type of group had not been created before. For those of us who have undergone a degree in the creative arts, be it in architecture or design, we are used to this type of practice. The ‘crit’ is a similar model to a ‘design review’. Your project is pinned up and critiqued by a number of invited luminaries/tutors, either as an opportunity for interim feedback, or by way of a final examination.

The role of the client
It takes an enlightened client to understand that without designers involved, projects rarely achieve their full potential.
Big organisations or government bodies, tasked with delivering the large-scale projects of our time, do not necessarily have those creative thinkers. They are often simply not set up that way as institutions, and are often the first to admit they don’t have the capability to achieve the design nuance needed to connect people and place. Setting up an independent panel of experts to help and support the design process is a simple way of capturing a diverse skillset and harnessing the creative potential of a project.

Turning ideas into reality – and capturing the imagination and innovation that can make our future better – are things we should all strive to do. As technological change accelerates, large-scale and expensive projects need to be future-proofed. We have to be able to anticipate not only what the next five or 10 years will look like, but also the next 50 to 100 years.

**Learning from HS2**

HS2 is the largest infrastructure project the UK has ever undertaken. As such, it is crucial that the UK delivers a system that is still fit for purpose 100 years from now. It is fully government-funded and, like all major UK infrastructure, is delivered by the private sector. With two of its four stations in London – constituting a large-scale intervention in our capital city, with both good and bad implications – it is essential that outstanding design is inherent within the process.

Learning lessons from the delivery of the Olympics in 2012, the government decided to set up an independent panel of experts from the creative and engineering industries to help advise, inspire and mentor HS2 Ltd to deliver their aspiration of a world-beating transport system. This was a design champion in the form of a ‘design panel’.

The difference to design panels of the past was the stage at which it was brought on board – right at the start of the process – and its formation, being made up of over 15 different disciplines rather than the usual two or three.

As its Chair, I see the panel acting as the design champion for the project. It is charged with upholding three principles, based around:
Design champions: putting creativity at the heart of public infrastructure

— **People** – design for everyone to benefit and enjoy.
— **Place** – design to create a sense of place.
— **Time** – design to stand the test of time.

These principles form the basis of a brief written into the ‘design vision,’ a published document setting out the design and quality aspirations of the project. As a key reference, the document focuses specifically on people, place and time; it outlines a set of clear aims to deliver design excellence in every aspect of HS2 to achieve its social, economic and environmental potential.

Using the design vision as its benchmark, HS2 then set up an independent panel of design champions to hold it to account.

Over 300 people of the highest calibre applied to be part of the panel, showing the level of interest for a leading role in such infrastructure projects. The resulting team of 45 has not only the necessary imagination but also an extraordinary wealth of talent, knowledge and skills across a diverse range of disciplines.

HS2 will create many new places and spaces, as well as restoring and growing existing natural environments. Placemaking will require consideration of the effects of regeneration, identity and environment. The design panel has been encouraging HS2 to help communities collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of their community. And in order to do this, they need to be strengthening the connection between people and the places that they share.

This has been of particular relevance in Euston. It is one of the most complex engineering projects ever to be undertaken, with numerous stakeholders all having differing priorities – and a Council at first opposed to (and petitioning against) the HS2 station.

One of the difficulties with the length and intricacy of the parliamentary process needed to achieve the ‘go ahead’ for such large infrastructure projects is the way in which it can disenfranchise the local community. With a planning process that is both rigid and institutionalised, it is hard to find the right mechanism for the community to voice their ideas and aspirations about the environment they inhabit.
Working with the community

The role of a design champion in this context is to empower those within the community – who arguably know the area better than anyone – to contribute fully to the debate. When carefully managed, this can result in a positive contribution rather than negative pushback. Good design can be used as the thread which binds dissenting voices, a place to find common ground and shared aspirations. No-one wants a poorly designed environment.

In order to try to capture this opportunity and tap into local knowledge we have set up specific station panels, made up of 50 per cent national and 50 per cent local representation. This means that a greater understanding of the local issues can be fed into the overall design process. At Euston, the design panel as design champion has already made some significant changes for the better. By encouraging a dialogue with all stakeholders, through design workshops and design panel critiques, we are beginning to build bridges and work collectively for the good of the project and the community it serves.

A major step forward was the recognition from HS2 that they needed to look outside the ‘red line’ (the area within which HS2 has the funding and mandate to build) in order to leverage the best regeneration opportunities around the station environs. The result of this was the commissioning of a strategic review to set and identify shared outcomes, constraints and issues for the station’s masterplan, and to establish a single aligned view on the future of Euston, drawing on conversations with the widest range of stakeholders possible – including government, its agencies, and the local authority.

The aim was not for the review to test solutions, or provide definitive solutions, but rather to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Euston today, and consider how the development of four stations (HS2, Network Rail, London Underground and the proposed Crossrail 2) could be integrated.

This review showed that there was very little divergence of views on these issues. In particular, it established a set of shared outcomes in economic and transport terms, as well as the constraints, all of which were common to all stakeholders. Here the role of ‘design champion’ was to help broker consensus through a shared process. It was a vital step in
Design champions: putting creativity at the heart of public infrastructure

ensuring that the design of the station would evolve in a way that adds to the wider long-term vision of Camden Council rather than stifles it. The design panel is not just interested in influencing the iconic parts of the project, like stations and large viaducts. It feels passionately that the many smaller bridges, viaducts, cuttings, embankments, ponds and footpaths should be designed with care. These are exactly the elements that can collectively make or break a sense of place. With that in mind we have been looking for the common themes that emerge when critiquing elements such as these. Integration and cross-cutting issues – such as combining a coherent national narrative with a local context – can be debated in a wider framework and strategic decisions made. For example, we have considered how mass-produced manufactured bridge elements can be ‘localised’ through material choice or concrete mix.

Designing for the future

Leadership is key and the need for well-thought-through, integrated advice on priorities is as strong as ever. With such long-term planning comes stability, and with stability comes the confidence needed for investment in both soft and hard infrastructure – vital in making great places to live. Keeping the faith, and the belief that good placemaking is the key to happier and healthier communities, will lead to the opportunity for all to prosper.

The design champion plays a vital part in guiding and inspiring, but most importantly in also ensuring that those involved do not take the path of least resistance. We cannot afford to rush into a project, allowing the ‘lowest common denominator’ to be the legacy for generations to come. By committing to take the time to design from inception through to delivery, we can help to give designers and engineers the occasion to develop and research new technologies that will last into the future.

In whatever form design is championed, I would strongly advocate that it has to be advocated within a framework of future ambition. There is need for a clear vision, grounded by strong awareness of the interdependencies between systems and ‘local’ knowledge of the place in which they operate: an awareness of the bigger picture, allied with an appreciation of the individual elements that make it up.
We all know that it won’t be easy, with global challenges that see the demand for resources increasing. As the world’s natural resources dwindle, it is incumbent on us to imagine a future which is both sustainable and in which our children can flourish and prosper.

Endnote
City limits: why real estate-centred regeneration needs a radical rethink

Indy Johar

The existing real estate-based regeneration model presents a conflict of interest between the short-term focus of many developers, the long-term issues facing the public sector, and the embedded local concerns of citizens, community and local business stakeholders.

The social contract underlying local regeneration seems broken, and we need a 21st century governance and finance model to structurally engage all stakeholders, realign interests, and rebuild trust and accountability.

Regeneration past and present

Urban renewal as an answer to social and economic deprivation has a long history. It emerged in the 19th century as a reaction to the living conditions of the urban poor in rapidly industrialising cities. The agenda assumed that better physical conditions for living would improve people’s lives morally, physically and economically. Though the needs, tools, framing and methodologies have changed over time, the underlying assumptions have remained largely unchanged – returning cyclically to prominence, both in the UK and internationally.

It should be recognised that the renewal of housing stock and urban conditions – through investment in build quality, urban design, safety, and cultural and social amenity – has delivered significant benefits. Equally, the positive impact of real estate-driven renewal on the life chances of target populations has often been too limited. Physical regeneration is increasingly associated with driving social and economic exclusion.
To many, real estate-centred regeneration has lost its credibility, its legitimacy and, perhaps more critically, its viability. This is even more problematic in a world where our societal challenges are becoming both ever more sticky and deeply embedded, due to a combination of factors such as rising levels of structural inequality, declining social mobility, stagnating wages, growing energy poverty and a shrinking public sector.

This carries significant risk. Today’s existing social and economic vulnerabilities drive important future costs and liabilities, attenuated or exacerbated depending on future trends. Such future liabilities are likely to have enormous impact on different place stakeholders, whether households, schools, prisons, housing associations, the NHS or local authorities.

Add to this mix the political direction of travel in terms of devolution and the zero-grant future for local authorities, and you arrive at a strategic, urgent and shared need to re-examine and reinvent our place regeneration models – realigning the interests of different stakeholders towards driving long-term, viable, positive impacts on people as well as places.

The need for this transition is increasingly recognised by all leaders of this debate in the public, private or civic sectors. But the debate needs to go beyond design images and rhetoric in conference halls. It needs to acknowledge the need for a new financial model to underpin positive change.

**Reaching the limits**

We need to recognise that the current financial model is reaching its limit and is inadequate to address the challenges presented by neighbourhood regeneration across London, let alone beyond. The surplus generated by the sale of residential, office and retail product is – or is claimed to be – increasingly insufficient to provide (via Section 106 agreements, Community Infrastructure Levies and other tools) the meaningful social investment necessary for regeneration and long-term liability reduction. It is also increasingly decoupled from it in practice. Meanwhile, new social investment models that are starting to make an impact across the UK seem to be disconnected from physical regeneration finance and practice.
City limits: why real estate-centred regeneration needs a radical rethink

What does an alternative model need to achieve? First, the goal of regeneration must go beyond the delivery of built form and ‘good architecture’ (as narrowly described since the 1990s) and focus on creating places that generate the conditions in which people can thrive – economically and socially.

Neighbourhood economic renewal needs to go further than the idea that revitalisation can be delivered by creating local construction jobs. The positive economic impact of regeneration projects needs to last beyond the construction phase, and instead be hardwired through the introduction of strategic enterprise and employment infrastructure, from workspace to contextually embedded start-up, independent retail and other local enterprise support.

Similarly, with everything we know about the social care crisis, a growing loneliness epidemic and, conversely, the many powerful positive effects of diverse social networks, we have to support the vibrant worlds of social and civic start-ups. Their diverse activities can and should be connected to physical regeneration practice.

In other words, urban regeneration can’t be the single arrow of physical redevelopment. It has to address the full and interrelated system complexity of how economic and social change happens, dealing with issues from physical and mental health to learning pathways; from accessing good food to employment opportunities.

So: if urban renewal cannot be driven (or its success measured) by traditional real estate development approaches, complemented by environmental and community plans – the search is on for a next-generation model.

A new model of change
This next generation urban renewal model must acknowledge that change can no longer be the responsibility or the capability of a single actor, organisation, institution or sector. Change needs coalitions and movements of multiple actors, both on the demand and supply side of innovation and intervention. It also needs an institutional architecture that supports this.

This is a change model that requires us to:
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— Shift the concept of leadership from being a managerial and single-organisational issue to one of building coalitions and movements around a shared purpose and mission.

— Focus on system-wide outcomes and returns on investment at that level, instead of traditional corporate and policy silos, and with investment no longer orientated around individual products and services.

— Move from accounting for individual, siloed balance sheets to a ‘whole area’ analysis of assets, liabilities and risks right across the built environment, health, education, enterprise and life opportunities.

— Reimagine democratic accountability – from traditional representational models to one driven by the integrity, diversity and inclusiveness of feedback – spanning humans, organisations, institutions and machines.

— Not just rely on external consultants’ intelligence and centralised decision-making ability, but enable local people and stakeholder organisations to be an integrated part of understanding an area, its issues and its opportunities.

Crucially, this is not just about regeneration putting economic and social outcomes at its heart. It is also about aligning this with practical finance and organisational tools that work for renewal in an integrated manner across the spectrum, from the physical – i.e. urban design and architecture – to public service provision.

This is no longer merely an option. Increasingly, it is the only path of viability, as our current financial and organisational models hit the respective ceilings and floors of viability, accountability and credibility.

If we refocused regeneration and its definition of success on the effective long-term returns achieved through the growth of human capital (health, skills, and social capital), we could leverage investment in real estate, infrastructure and institutions, as well as other finance streams that flow through our cities and neighbourhoods. This could ultimately realise a multifold return on such diverse and integrated investment: a powerful next step in the rapidly evolving world of impact investment.
City limits: why real estate-centred regeneration needs a radical rethink

If this sounds like a pipe dream, we should not forget that this is a moment of unprecedented growth in technological capability. This matters for regeneration. The systemic nature of area-based deprivation has long been understood: these issues have been recognised and researched over the course of the last 100 years or more.

Too often we have lacked the institutional alignment, business models, investment tools and, most critically, the technologies to match this awareness. Now, however, new tools and new ways of understanding deep-seated issues can help to reinvent urban renewal. In particular, three macro drivers are converging.

System change
System thinking has given us new tools focused on recognising complexity instead of ignoring the interplay of multiple factors and drivers, with multiple loops of causality. In turn, this can enable a diversity of change agents to self-organise and collaboratively address different elements of a complex system.

Often referred to as ‘collective impact’, such coalitions are not about partnerships between a handful of key institutions sitting in a closed boardroom, but rather about a new architecture for citizens, states, markets and civic organisations to work together. With the absence of a single top-down perspective, this starts to give us a fundamentally different way of organising change.

Computation capacity
Massive advances in cloud computing and big data are working together to enable a series of shifts. They unlock previously unimaginable forms of micro-contracting and transactions – such as Airbnb, the micro-trading of previously locked bedrooms; Google, which leverages micro-payments from advertising; or crowdfunding, from Neighborly to Kickstarter. This means we can now harness the power, agency and investment capacity of multiple small actors.

Equally, new phenomena like blockchains (the technology underpinning Bitcoin) have the capacity to demonstrate and enact massive systematic interoperability at the contractual level of a movement of organisations and individuals working together.
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This can structure new ways of being mutually accountable through the use of smart contracts: digitally powered multi-party contracts, linked in real time to the achievement of certain outcomes, can bind together a range of interests.

Let’s for a moment imagine an architecture contract focused not on the delivery of a school or hospital, but on reducing truancy, improving learning results or enabling faster recovery after operations.

Impact financing

Social impact bonds (and impact financing more generally) have given us the framework to understand the cost and financial risks associated with social or environmental degradation. We now can create instruments to naturally hedge against those future risks. Though it’s still early days, there are now several social impact bonds focused on intensive early-years action in at-risk families, and on reducing reoffending rates. These have started to allow viable investments in a new ‘preventative economy’.

These sorts of investment structures need to be combined with the recognition that the most challenging social issues (like poverty, social exclusion, inequality in health outcomes, ageing, and climate change) are a class of “wicked challenges” which cannot be addressed in isolation or by selecting single points of intervention. We can then start to imagine a typology of new instruments for investment, funding new multi-party coalitions for change.

So far impact investing has largely remained a niche instrument. No attempt has been made to interrogate and adapt the mathematical models which underpin other elements of our finance system. This leap will need to happen in order to disrupt a system which too often still sees impact investing as a ‘nice little thing to do’ when all bigger commercial deals are taken care of.

In this near future, let’s imagine a new class of derivatives – impact derivatives – a structured collection of impact contracts (with a mixture of grant, equity, outcome and service financing) that drive collaborative working, collective impact and virtuous benefit, as opposed to just the management and diversification of risk. Let’s imagine what these new instruments could do for urban renewal. Imagine an internal
rate of return that includes outgoing cash flows associated with the market failures behind area deprivation – all too often ignored in our current thinking.

The dark matter of next-generation urban renewal
Together, these shifts are creating the architecture for what I call the new ‘dark matter’ of urban regeneration: invisible, but fundamental in underpinning the real-world outcomes we should strive for.

Shared interest: recognising that wealth and liabilities will be shared and interdependent. Such a model needs to align the interests and aspirations of many material stakeholders, including the local authority, the developer, the community, local enterprise, investors, change catalysts and future major occupiers of regenerated places.

Data-driven renewal: placing real-time, big-data-driven impact analysis at the core of practice. A data and impact architecture to monitor the positive impact of regeneration across a new network of social or environmental liability holders, along with validating its monetisation.

New asset class: unlocking long-term capital markets by matching financiers (both established players and new types of impact investors) with sustainable returns aligned to public sector and community interests – for example, an ‘impact derivative’ focusing both on future social and environmental liabilities and yields through direct and indirect interventions.

Long-term inclusive economic development: delivering on the need for local jobs by advancing economic multipliers through a wide range of neighbourhood investments both large and small.

Open accountability and trust-building: creating a new class of governance tools and methods which recognise the need to grow multi-stakeholder trust as a prerequisite for innovation by the many; using smart contracts to link outcomes data to regeneration contracts in order to match trust with real accountability.
This vision is, from my perspective, the near future of urban renewal: a ‘systems thinking’ approach where all investments in a neighbourhood, town and city – from the physical environment, to social infrastructure, welfare and the local enterprise economy – are focused on the return of investment in terms of human capital. Not only will this help us structurally avoid or mitigate future social costs in disadvantaged areas, but it will also focus regeneration on being a positive investment in the untapped potential of citizens.

The question we face is not whether this future will emerge, but who will take the lead in developing the ‘dark matter’ tools, instruments, institutional infrastructure, practices and capabilities necessary to rebuild our urban regeneration industry. There are massive challenges and opportunities in the 21st century – will the UK continue to lead the way?
Planning by numbers: can technology help us make better places?

Euan Mills

In the last century cities have become the most common habitat for humans. But despite the massive growth in people living in urban environments, we are still unable to consistently create places that are conducive to our happiness and wellbeing.

While we’ve seen significant advancements in our tools and technology across the spectrum of human activities, the way we plan and design our own habitats remains archaic. As a result, we continue to build and grow cities which undermine our physical and mental health, and lack the resilience and sustainability to allow them to change and adapt in the future.

Jan Gehl famously exclaimed: “We know more about good habitats for mountain gorillas, Siberian tigers, or panda bears than we know about a good urban habitat for homo sapiens.” Despite being in an age of ‘Big Data’, the quality and relevance of the data we have about our cities is surprisingly poor. Our data lacks granularity and is mostly out of date: yet it is from this that we formulate the rules and policies that guide the quality of the cities we build.

However, we are at a point in time where the opportunities presented by new technology can radically change how we build our urban environments. We can now create tools to allow us to monitor and understand what makes good quality places faster and better than we ever could. Our policies can be less ambiguous and can also be designed to be regularly adjusted based on outcomes; decision-making can be fully inclusive and accountable.
The trend

In 1965, Gordon Moore observed that the number of transistors we fit into an integrated circuit was doubling every year – this became known as Moore’s Law. His observation proved to be surprisingly accurate to this day. The price and size of our computers have decreased exponentially while their power has increased. Today we have in our pockets computers with similar processing power to that of a mouse brain.

The low price and miniaturisation of processors means we have deployed sensors in nearly everything: a mesh of interlinked passive sensors in our watches, clothes, shoes, rubbish bins, cars, mobile phones and homes collect and create a constant stream of data unbeknownst to us. We actively add to this web of data through the 2.9 million emails we send per second, the 20 hours of videos we upload to YouTube per minute, the 50 million Tweets per day, as well as the plethora of social media posts, Google searches and Amazon purchases that are continuously tracked. The combination of these vast quantities of data and increasing processing power mean our machines become smarter and learn for themselves. At the start of 2016, DeepMind, a British company acquired by Google, taught a general-purpose software program how to play the ancient Chinese game of Go.

Despite its simple rules, Go has so many variables that it is technically impossible to calculate, and the best players are known to use intuition to play. This general-purpose software program not only mastered the game: it beat the South Korean professional Go player Lee Sedol, one of the best players in the world.

Through the learning capabilities of machines, we now have computers that mark school essays, provide legal advice, drive planes and cars and have proven to be more effective at identifying some forms of cancer than clinical pathologists. Ray Kurzweil predicts that by 2025 we will have machines that can pass the Turing test – a test which looks to differentiate computers from humans through language – and by 2050 we will have reached “technological singularity”, where humans and computers will have become indivisible.

To put this into perspective, most of our housing targets are based on population demographic projections to 2050, and the policies in our Local Development Plans plan for a period of 25 years.
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Today
These technological advancements may seem far-fetched and irrelevant to urban planners, but their early manifestations have already changed the ways we use cities. As well as the often cited Airbnb and Uber, there are more subtle but equally impactful innovations, such as live traffic information provided by Waze, the multi-modal transport integration of Citymapper, or the enabling of car clubs, bike sharing and co-working spaces, unscalable without our current Information and Communications Technologies (ICT).

While digitisation is well on its way to transforming how we live in and use cities, the way we design and plan them remains firmly in the 20th century. The McKinsey Industry Digitization Index for Europe shows the construction industry at the bottom of the list. One glance at the workflow of a Local Planning Authority, both in their plan-making and development management roles, will reveal archaic ways of working that make the construction industry look relatively advanced.

Local Development Plans take years to put together and cost hundreds of thousands of pounds and, when they eventually get through examination, their evidence and policies are out of date, and the whole process needs to start again.

The policies themselves are based on evidence from a motley collection of rarely read research reports and out-of-date surveys, where the original data is hidden and inaccessible. These evidence reports are mostly outsourced to the same consultants that work for developers, who repackage their findings in support of the developers’ planning applications.

Occasionally evidence is collected in-house: for example, in ‘call for sites’ – where out of date methodologies, such as ‘voluntary call for sites’, are used to estimate the total amount of developable land in a city, resulting in huge error margins. Yet, critical policies on housing density, design and building height are based on this.

The monitoring of our plans and their associated development are done through oversimplified Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). These are formulated only around available metrics, rather than what we’d like to know. For example, we measure the number of homes built, and quantity of greenbelt retained; but not whether homes are occupied, provide
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good-quality living conditions, or whether our open spaces are liked and well used.

The planning applications process also relies on time-consuming analogue processes, ripe for error and obfuscation. Planning submissions still consist of boxes of printed drawings and supporting documents, sometimes accompanied by a CD with hundreds of ambiguously titled, non-machine readable PDF documents – which under-resourced officers rarely have the time to read.

Officers trawl through boxes of printed scale drawings from which to manually measure areas of flats, or distances between bedroom windows, in hopeless attempts to fully understand the complexity of major development proposals. Decisions are then made on a case-by-case basis, with a haphazard understanding of the cumulative impact of the hundreds, if not thousands, of other developments that go through the planning department every year.

Finally, there are the communities, who only ever find out about local development if someone happens to stop and read an ambiguously worded A4 laminated paper fixed to a lamp-post. Even after deciphering the technical jargon, the chances of communities understanding these proposals are minute. They often rely on self-proclaimed community activists, some of whom have entrenched anti-development attitudes, who will spread misinformation with more ease and traction than formal channels.

Tomorrow

There are, however, early seeds of change. Space Syntax has managed to quantify and predict improvements to permeability; State of Place is quantifying quality of place and putting an economic value to it; UrbanPlanAR is exploring the use of augmented reality to visualise proposed new buildings in their actual locations; Land Insight and Urban Intelligence are creating a growing database of planning application and policy data; and Commonplace and Stickyworld are improving community participation.

These are just some of the many innovators and researchers that are starting to bring new technology to the planning system. Meanwhile, the government continues to build on the success of Building Information
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Modelling (BIM) Level 2 and is upgrading it to BIM Level 3 – to bring benefits not only to construction but also to asset management and how we plan cities. Today it would only take a small tweak to our planning system to ensure all major planning applications are submitted as 3D BIM files, with all the data that planning officers need to assess proposals fully embedded into them. This consolidation of data would allow us to create tools that automatically assess development proposals against planning policies and building controls, to identify issues before the developer enters a costly pre-application process.

This early assessment could include the microclimatic impact in the surrounding area, such as sunlight and wind; visual impacts of the development in conservation areas and on the setting of listed buildings; residential quality, through an assessment of dimensions and orientation of residential units; and even viability, comparing this to live data on sales values and construction costs.

Developers could then be notified if their scheme significantly diverges from policy requirements, modify the scheme accordingly, or be passed on to a case officer to enter into negotiations. Such a system would critically cut down the levels of uncertainty for developers and allow planners to focus on more complex decisions.

Planning departments are already looking to create 3D City Information Models (CIM), which would allow the assessment of planning proposals to be done within their rapidly changing context. Planning officers could visualise each application and compare it to developments still in construction, those yet to be built, and those in the planning system at the time, comparing anything from viability to car parking ratios or building height. This would allow officers to have a more robust understanding of the impacts of every development they assess, and their recommendations would be significantly better informed than they are today.

Every new proposal tested in this model would add to a growing database, providing the Planning Authority with valuable information about commercial activity, developer priorities, trends in building typologies and much more. This database could be further augmented with the increasing amount of data already available from passive and active sources such as telecoms, social media and financial transactions.
We could also target data collection through passive sensors built into streets and buildings, collecting data on, for example, occupancy and dwell time. This would enable us to better understand the types of places and spaces where citizens spend time – which, combined with sentiment analysis of social media, would allow us to start measuring citizen satisfaction and wellbeing in the public realm.

A data-rich multi-layered live CIM would then become a tool not only for monitoring and visualising things which are easily quantifiable – such as the number of homes, social infrastructure and green space – but also for monitoring everything else we need to know about cities, such as whether homes are occupied, how high streets are being used, and possibly even how citizens feel in our parks and public spaces.

This level of feedback allows us to design our plans so that policies can be tweaked in response to the types of places we want, rather than merely numbers of homes or jobs. For example, if we have policies that stipulate the need for balconies or open spaces, and identify that these are not being used when they face north or are overshadowed, we can tweak the policy accordingly.

Policies regarding planning gain, for example, can be fine-tuned to respond to economic cycles, increasing requirements during times of prosperity and reducing them during depressions. Mixed-use policies can be altered subject to the changing nature of businesses or the proliferation of bookmakers and estate agents. This live, data-rich CIM would also allow us to build robust agent-based simulations, where we can test and prototype policies and developments before implementing them.

With a system where we can live-monitor and test the impact of our policies, we can redesign the format of our Local Plans: rather than fixed, self-contained publications, they could be more flexible and agile lists of policies with varied time frames and sell-by-dates. Some might be written to achieve yearly or even monthly short-term outcomes, such as improving air quality, while others might be concerned with long-term requirements about the need for daylight and sunlight in the public realm.

Finally, having a spatial simulation of the changing city would also allow for much greater engagement with citizens. Giving citizens access to this model would allow them to visualise everything in three
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dimensions and develop greater understanding of the impacts that individual developments and policies are having in areas they care about. They’ll also be significantly more informed and able to give good-quality, real-time feedback to genuinely influence how we plan.

The first step

Of course, it is unlikely that the planning system of the future will be as described here, but it is inevitable that by 2050 the way we plan cities will be very different to today. The changes will be slow and incremental, with no single product or service creating the fundamental paradigm shift that planning needs.

Large technology companies will be eager to sell us complete off-the-shelf digital planning services, but we need to resist this. We need to ensure that the data we collect and give away is open and accessible to all; that the tools we use are transparent and interoperable; and that the policies we write are clear and accountable. Achieving this is not just about making our jobs easier, but about democratising how we plan cities, resulting in places that are better designed, better built and better equipped to respond to a changing world.
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