The sharing society will change land use

Planning needs to look to the future. If it does then long standing policies affecting land use and development will need fundamental re-assessment

The housing and planning bill presently being rushed through parliament is the latest indication of how planning has risen up the political agenda. But whilst earnest discussion takes place about the status of the green belt, the densification of the suburbs and the meaning of "starter homes" and of "permission in principle", publications devote pages to autonomous vehicles, the threat posed by Uber to conventional taxis and changing regulations for short-term letting pressured by Airbnb.

The sharing economy is beginning to sweep through our society in a way that challenges a lot of long-standing assumptions. The essential benefits of making the best use of resources often by sharing them one way or another cannot be denied. But it challenges their regulation.

The surprise announcement by former Secretary of State Eric Pickles repealing the London Regulation which makes the letting of a house or flat for fewer than 90 nights unlawful within Greater London was essentially a response to the challenge of Airbnb and the difficulty which boroughs have had with its enforcement. The currently proposed compromise of limiting short-term letting to a maximum of three months in any one year seems reasonable but may still be difficult to enforce.

The expectation that suburban areas are capable of densification to meet a significant part of the housing shortage, particularly where there is a good public transport accessibility, the use of small, underused previously developed sites, marginal greenbelt land and some backland is becoming established as a broad policy objective. But when it comes to the individual proposal, the planning authority still rigorously applies minimum parking standards, accessibility, road network capacity and suchlike policies and guidelines.

As *The Economist* writes (9th January page 55), ride-sharing, car clubs and other alternatives to ownership are already growing fast. Young city-dwellers, they say, are turning their backs on owning a costly asset that sits largely unused and loses value the moment it's first driven. They go on to report forecasts by Barclays Bank that fully driverless vehicles will result in the average American household cutting its car ownership from 2.1 vehicles now to 1.2 by 2040. The 11 million annual sales of mass market cars for personal ownership in America may be replaced by 3.8 million sales of self-driving cars, either personally owned or part of taxi fleets.

These trends will take root in the largest cities before they spread out. We can expect the impact of these changes to accelerate through the next few years and to have been established and accepted by the time the houses required to provide minimum parking standards and unable to do so would have been occupied.

Planning needs to get ahead of the curve.

Planning in London has been published and edited by Brian Waters, Lee Mallett and Paul Finch since 1992

>>>

A boom in local authority development activity

No growth, no more money will lead to a boom in local authority development activity

Conservative policy has yoked future fiscal growth for local authorities to increases in the local tax base. That means creating more rateable property, commercial, residential or otherwise. This will become much more tangible by 2020. Those who can remember the fiscal incontinence of previous eras might regard this as a sensible parameter. No growth, no more money. It seems the only way to circumvent local nimbyism, maintain fiscal control, and encourage politicians to grasp the nettle of development. Carrot and stick combined.

There is a scramble underway by boroughs, using the liberties granted by the Localism Act, to establish their own development companies to exploit their assets, as these - if they get their developments and the timing right - will throw off profits. It seems churlish to point out these potential profits have been lying around unexploited for several previous booms - and busts - but at last boroughs are smelling the coffee.

This will lead to a boom in local authority development activity, probably much of it in partnership with others, unprecedented since the 1960s and 1970s. Many boroughs will seize the opportunity to placate their electorates by building more 'council houses', in the same opportunistic fashion developers exploit sites without considering the wider issues of failed urbanism.

And this is where the 'planning' system should enter in. Having seen a few schemes on the drawing boards proposed by local development companies established by boroughs, it is clear that local political strife over the future of housing estates, for example, is dissuading officers from embarrassing their political masters by looking at the bigger picture. This is not the case everywhere, and Lambeth council's scheme for the redevelopment of Somerleyton Road in Brixton, for example, looks like an extremely positive example of a more enlightened approach.

In 2016, senior planners, development and regeneration officers, and Design Review Panel members all over London need to gird their professional loins and force politicians to act in the best interests of the only client that really matters which is 'place'. Schemes to maximise and renew assets need very good masterplanning and that means setting a wider context for what happens next - not the political opportunism of placating local people. This takes guts and leadership. Place should trump internal politics and siloed administrative issues.

London's growth needs a 'narrative' to convince Londoners it is happening and that if it is embraced it will deliver better lives. Boroughs need to develop better skills to explain these high-level stories at site, neighbourhood and borough-wide scales, led by the GLA's example. All need better resourcing to do this. The next four years will see this need grow exponentially. If London's planning system is to guide and direct growth, it needs to bust out of its role as legalistic, over-regulated prophylactic, and provide vision-led leadership in partnership with the private sector. ■