

Smarter growth around stations

Nicholas Falk argues that a green and blue web can use the power of nature to boost economic and social development and overcome inertia.

While substantial development has taken place in the hearts of many of our cities, especially in Central London, it is the areas at the edges and centres of mid-sized towns and cities that now face the greatest challenges. Shopping on the internet is displacing the out of town stores developed on the sites of former factories and mills, which was the first wave of urban regeneration. Services have replaced manufacturing industry. There is a mass of underused land and property on the edge of town centres and often around the railway stations that could form the basis for sustainable urban renewal. But development depends on land in different ownerships being assembled through a mechanism to bring the different interests together.

Practical solutions were set out in URBED's Capital Gains report on land assembly for the Greater London Authority, which drew on expert advice from lawyers and surveyors along with case studies of what worked. For example in France ZACs (Zones d'Amenagement Concertes) are used to join up public and private investment. The legal firm of Dentons used their experience to propose designating 'Land Assembly Zones' along with other measures to make development easier. The National Wealth Fund, which was set up to support economic growth and clean energy, could now play a similar role to European state banks such as the Caisse des Depots. But efforts need to be focused on places with real growth potential, which requires spatial planning at the regional level. The slow progress in developing Ebbsfleet in Kent or Northstowe in Cambridge, new settlements that were to serve as prototype 'ecotowns', should be a warning that policies and targets are not enough. So in a situation when uncertainties are slowing everything down, how can development be accelerated to meet changing priorities, and Spatial Development Strategies be used to bring different interests together?

Green Webs and Social Cities

The overwhelming challenges for spatial planning and building housing at scale in the future will not only be addressing climate change and also the social inequalities which are causing communities to break up and wildlife to die. In the UK we urgently need to reduce the impact of the private car, and to promote alternatives such as public transport and active travel. We also have to much better use of our existing housing stock, and to use 'green wedges' or 'fingers' as in parts of Scotland or Copenhagen to change the images of former industrial areas. Where land in the Green Belt is required for development, as Labour is proposing, not only should part of the uplift in value be used to fund local infrastructure but it should also be used to improve access for leisure, starting with making walking easier and safer. So instead of treating the green belt as a sterile corset or girdle the best of town and country could be combined in new development through what I call a Green Web.

What Ebenezer Howard called the Social City in his original pamphlet Tomorrow: a peaceful path to real reform in 1898 still offers a useful model. A compilation of my articles published in Town and Country Planning on Building Social Cities over a decade on Growing Social Cities brings his ideas up to date. The basic ideas are still is to link a cluster of settlements with high quality public transport, to maintain the spaces in between so that more people look out to green space or water, and to use the resulting uplift in land values to improve and maintain the local environment. Instead of separating town from country, they should be woven together to form a green web. Existing streets can be rapidly transformed by using trees and landscaping such as parklets, which is a cost-effective way of securing public support for new housing.

Speedy delivery and ongoing maintenance will be key. The best mechanism to achieve the government's objectives and reconcile the different interests is the Mayoral Development Corporation. Examples are the Milton Keynes Parks Trust, which was funded from the rentals paid by small shops, and the park between Stratford and Hackney Wick, which was created from land used for the London Olympics by the London Legacy Development Corporation. A body like the National Infrastructure Commission needs to identify the best places for growth or renewal, using Digital Intelligence to bring the data together and hence side-step vested interests. Spatial Development Strategies should show where new homes and other development are best concentrated, and how these link up with future sources of employment. The complex and time-

consuming process of assembling the land and upgrading the local infrastructure can then proceed with the prospect of Outline Planning Permission for homes that meet certain standards. The back-up power of Compulsory Purchase powers can avoid land speculation.

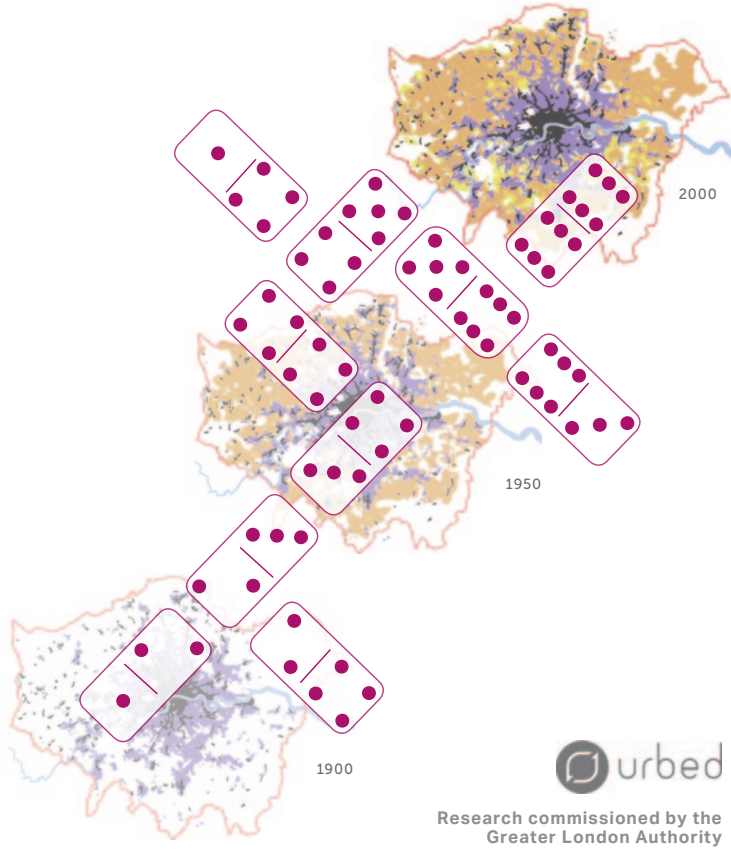
Generating confidence, and even the hope that things can be improved, will be difficult in the current financial climate. So it is important to come up with a programme for conserving and improving the natural environment that will yield early results and engage the interest and support of local communities who might otherwise be opposed. The success of places like the New England Quarter in Brighton, which URBED masterplanned, or the former railway lands in Kings Cross show how an incremental approach can work when you start next to a railway station. A Green Web can revive hope and development trusts can put waste space to good use with a mass of social and environmental benefits. A study by planning and development consultants Lichfields has revealed the many well-connected stations around England where housing development is viable. In total these could well meet most of the UK's immediate housing needs.

Furthermore, instead of having to wait for the facilities needed to create a community, the process will add value to what might formerly have been written off as waste land. This was the model used to develop London's Metroland in the Interwar period. The Board of the Metropolitan Railway promoted new housing on surplus land bought for new stations in some eight locations in North West London, which became some of the most attractive places to live. A similar recent story can be told of the



Dr Nicholas Falk is the founder of URBED and executive director of The URBED Trust

CAPITAL GAINS: A BETTER LAND ASSEMBLY MODEL FOR LONDON



area around Kings Cross or on the London Overground that runs through London's East End through neighbourhoods such as Dalston and Rotherhithe. Frequent modern trains and upgraded or new stations, are now bordered by distinctive apartment blocks in areas once notorious for criminality and vice. New green spaces such as Dalston's Eastern Curve have used 'wilding' to create great places to relax in former wastelands.

The UK has a unique opportunity to make the most of its rich heritage of urban green spaces, which include canals and cemeteries and the front gardens that border tree-lined suburban streets. It also has an abundance of under-used suburban railway lines, with plenty of scope for promoting integrated transport in provincial cities to match their European counterparts. Reducing the amount of traffic in urban areas would release space for walking and cycling, as progressive cities like Copenhagen or Freiburg have done through planned urban extensions combined with upgraded light rail systems. The results are evident in longer active lives and greater feelings of wellbeing which should lead in turn to reduced pressures on the NHS and lower health insurance claims.

Implementing a green transition

Green webs need champions. Local trusts serve as a valuable third force in restoring run-down areas to life. Organisations such as Groundwork or Wildlife Trusts have transformed isolated >>>

ABOVE:
The image on the front cover of our report for the GLA shows quite well how cities grow over time. The client was James Murray who was then Deputy Mayor and is now Health Secretary

Green infrastructure at King’s Cross

We have had the great privilege at King’s Cross, to create a new part of London from what was an under-used industrial site. This new neighbourhood has been built around a green framework. More than 40% of the 67-acre development is given over to open space. A new network of streets and footpaths lead through new parks, gardens and leafy squares. As well as this, Regent’s Canal flows through the heart of the neighbourhood.

These routes, and the waterway, link with a wider network of green spaces in Camden and Islington. Over 400 new trees are being planted and where possible, walls and roofs are greened. King’s Cross is now a lush, green neighbourhood, rich with natural life.

As well as creating a pleasant environment for everyone to enjoy, these green spaces deliver a whole range of economic and health benefits. They help wildlife to flourish and reduce the risk of flooding. The new trees for example provide shade, enhance air quality by absorbing pollutants and offer a resting place for birds.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGjoMVzHmKg>

In this short video I share what 40 years of regenerating King's Cross has taught me about place-making. From an area once defined by drugs, prostitution and derelict industrial land, to today's thriving "knowledge quarter" - I trace the steps: building a sense of security, taming traffic, repurposing her-itage assets like the Coal Drops and Granary Building, and turning old gas holders into some of London's most desirable housing. I distil the process into a simple formula - Ambition, Brokerage, Continuity - and ask a ques-tion I think matters for our profession: how far can this be replicated elsewhere?

>>>> neglected areas with the help of nature, voluntary efforts and public pump-priming. Community Land Trusts are helping people to house themselves when they get support from local land owners. (www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk). Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) with a stake in property would provide neighbourhoods with the extra income needed to maintain an extended public realm. The Green Corridor initiative in the North East is a promising £3 million project with a range of partners and funded by a research body that needs to be replicated in every region.

Design Codes and Charters will help raise standards and engage communities in a positive way. The Cambridgeshire Charter for Quality Growth, published in 2010, offers a model that has endured, and the mixed use developments around Cambridge Station show how to combine high density new housing with publicly accessible green spaces. Significantly Microsoft moved their base there from a peripheral science park The former Railway Lands at Kings Cross offer an even greater example of the transformation that can follows from an initial investment in landscaping and improving public access. But a fresh source of seed capital is needed to address the parlous state of most local authorities, the long times it takes to get projects agreed, and the reluctance of private developers to invest unless they can literally see improvements are underway.

So to boost confidence in the government's plans how about some kind of Common Wealth Fund to complement the National Wealth Fund and to support 'transformational projects' or 'environmental 'beacons'? The funding could come from a slice of the uplift in land values from areas that benefit from renewal, or form part of much needed property tax

reforms. At a city region level some form of Local Infrastructure Financing Trusts (LIFT) could bring public and private resources together and be the vehicle for corporate investment in projects that serve as beacons for a green transition. My policy paper for the TCPA on Sharing the Uplift in Land Values provides the evidence.

The priority should be to transform areas that are easiest to access and are highly visible. By mapping land that is publicly owned and close to railway stations and town centres areas for intensification can be systematically identified and vested interests overcome. The potential Rate Yield from bringing under-used land and properties into beneficial use should make the economic arguments for urban intensification overwhelming. Brightening up the most visible areas will also provide immediate signs that improvements are underway and that the government's policies go beyond targets.

Profitable developments around stations in much of London already prove the viability of a mix of people living at higher densities. Well-designed and managed neighbourhoods in areas close to railway stations with access to open spaces could transform the image and appeal of run-down areas in the country at large.

Mid-rise residential development around courtyard gardens can also cater for a wider range of ages and incomes. The key is a development framework that serves as a trellis, not a blueprint. Like a garden the results look best when there is rich mix of uses with a variety of people living and working together to provide the necessary stewardship. A green and blue web can use the power of nature to boost economic and social development and overcome inertia. ■