

Place Shaping, Spatial Planning and Liveability

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Following on from two successful events in 2006, the Housing and the Regions Research Network held a further two-day seminar in March 2008. The event, again generously supported by the Regional Studies Association, was held at University College London. A total of thirteen presentations explored the potential of the new planning system to deliver a broader 'place shaping' agenda with a view to achieving enhanced 'liveability' within new communities, eco-towns, and regenerated neighbourhoods. The focus was on place and place shaping, on the process of spatial planning, and on the concept of 'liveability' as a core component of delivering sustainable communities. The papers presented at the event looked across the 'place shaping' process and its outcomes, and examined the evolving role of the planning process in delivering against this agenda. The event was well attended by academics, research students and policy-makers and provoked much lively and stimulating debate.

Day One began with two scene-setting presentations from Professors Peter Roberts and Janice Morphet. Peter's focus was broadly on sustainable communities and their delivery, and on the importance of place. By way of introducing the seminar's general emphasis, on 'place', he began by arguing that planning needs to recognise the importance of product, of creating the places and the communities where people want to live and work, and should therefore direct all efforts - invested in the process of sustainable development - in understanding and delivering against a 'place shaping agenda'. The right skills, he argued, will be crucial in place shaping, with skill and knowledge enhancement now recognised as the essential starting point for effective place shaping. The next step once the right skills are in place is to strengthen implementation powers and provide adequate resources: both vital ingredients in the realisation of any vision. He concluded his presentation by underscoring the realisation that provided the impetus for this seminar: that re-engagement with place-shaping is a huge challenge and opportunity for the 'planning community', which will henceforth need to grapple with the question of exactly how to develop a 'full service' programme for places, making them liveable and workable.

Exactly why and how government will bring about this return to shaping places in an integrated manner was a topic picked up in the second scene-setting presentation. Professor Janice Morphet began by arguing that planning is moving to centre stage, with evidence of a new integrative role at local, sub-regional and regional level. She suggested that planning is returning to key interests that defined the system between 1947 and 1974: the co-ordination of public sector investment will have a major effect on planning and the places it shapes in the years ahead, and will be a critical means of delivering against the 'full service' programme highlighted by Peter Roberts. Her talk drew out the process and means by which public agents, no longer constrained by historic boundaries or professional silos, should come together in a shared process of place shaping.

Because the seminar sought to connect this 'mission change' for spatial planning to the housing growth and sustainable communities' agenda, the next two contributions concentrated on the growth challenge confronting government and its consequent response. Andrew Morrison from the DCLG provided an insight into government's thinking on housing growth and housing policy 'post-Barker'. He emphasised the heightened policy emphasis on affordability, especially for first time

buyers, and outlined how the policies set out in Housing Green Paper would tackle affordability on the back of a general increase in housing supply: the much-publicised 240,000 homes each year up to 2016. His reflections on this target came too early, perhaps, to be influenced by the more recent credit crunch and Kate Barker's own evaluation of how this might impact on housing supply. Government's continuing focus is on how to build more homes but at the same time lighten their ecological footprint: this was posted as 'mission critical' for policy-makers.

Following on from Andrew's overview, Professor Vincent Nadin considered planning's changing role in delivering against the big policy objectives (i.e. building more homes for the sake of affordability whilst lessening the impact on the environment) and within a broader place shaping process. He argued that the emergent 'spatial planning approach' encourages planning authorities to be more strategic and more 'proactive' in gluing together the spatial aspects of sometimes disjointed 'sectoral' policies and actions. Echoing the sentiments of Peter Roberts, he argued that planning needs to focus its energies on delivering broad outcomes (viable, liveable places) rather than process-outputs (the 'right number' of houses) and that it can only do this if it plans from the 'evidence of the drivers of spatial development' across functional territories in a collaborative way, built on delivery partnerships. Drawing on a case study of housing growth in North Northamptonshire, Vincent's presentation explored how the preparation of the planning authority's LDF core strategy met many of the criteria of effective spatial planning, especially in terms of its creativity and commitment to collaborative delivery. But he also noted real evidence of a step change in delivery citing the new settlement at Priors Hall, Corby, as an example of how creative and integrative thinking can deliver better places.

Two further contributions dealing with the spatial planning process looked at its role in 'development management' and in effective community engagement. Recent planning and local government reforms have sought to present planning as a positive and proactive instrument that serves the creation of sustainable places and also the communities that will populate and live in these places. But less than 6% of local authorities have an approved core strategy in place. Given that government expected all authorities to have a core strategy by 2006, this looks to be a critical failure. Professor Dave Shaw looked at how the system is operating in practice, and offered an explanation as to why this apparently critical failure has arisen. He argued that the recent period of rapid and fairly radical policy change has left some authorities feeling bewildered; others have responded by becoming over-ambitious, being subsequently let down by a lack of resources and capacity, including a lack of corporate leadership. But if there have been 'teething troubles' during the move to a spatial planning approach, these have not only been experienced within planning authorities. Other public sector, private sector and community sector partners have sometimes been slow to embrace the culture shift that has been taking place, and have not always cooperated as much as they might or should have done with other partners within this evolving process. That said, Dave also noted that good practice examples are constantly coming to light up and down the country: examples of innovative working and consequently positive outcomes. Overall, he argued that spatial planning is effectively a return to good planning and that not everyone will get it right immediately. The slowness in formulating core strategies was inevitable given the great variations in commitment, understanding and capacity (amongst a huge number of potential partners) across the country.

These discussions of policy provided a critical background to an analysis of implementation. Stephen Hill offered a 'regeneration practitioner's perspective' on

place shaping, drawing on recent projects aiming to embed strategic sustainable development decisions into the earliest stages of master-planning and to connect the delivery of development with the long-term stewardship of place. Stephen drew on the experience at Barking Reach to illustrate some of the disjunctions between planning, investment and delivery evident both within the process of place shaping and in its outcomes. Contrasting this situation with what is widely considered one of the best examples of innovative urbanism in Europe, Vauban in Germany, he argued that these disjunctions standing in the way of effective place shaping require urgent remedy.

A further case study in place shaping was provided by Marcus Adams and Ying Ying Tian, who put a mixed use development at Caterham under the spotlight. The transformation of former military barracks into a 'liveable community' was used to illustrate how a community-led approach and effective partnership working are vital ingredients in place shaping. It was argued that apart from providing high quality housing, good public space and the right community facilities (that meet the needs and aspirations of different sections of the community) effective place shaping will also embrace issues of community identity, through the reinforcement of social structure and by enhancing community assets: in other words, providing a built context in which communities can thrive.

During the second day, speakers focused on the way in which place shaping should address the issue of 'liveability' especially through the design process. Professor Michael Hebbert set the scene, arguing that the twin goals of 'liveability' and 'sustainability' do not always enjoy a harmonious relationship, but confuse and conflate those needs that flow from human use with issues of environmental conservation. Whilst these two agendas are often muddled together, they are distinct for most practical purposes: achieving a balance between liveability and sustainability is the most basic and fundamental goal of place shaping. Using a 'chariotteering metaphor', Michael argued that urban designers often have 'two or three wayward horses in harness of unequal strength and with an inclination to pull in different directions'. The measure of success in place shaping – and in contemporary urbanism - should be how well the 'handler' deals with these competing horses and makes places work equally well for people and for the biosphere.

Following this introduction, three further morning presentations dealt with design, liveability and the environment. Quentin Stevens' contribution focused attention on the discourse and political pursuit of 'liveability'. He began by unpacking the concept, arguing that it conveys a vague sense of public interest as well as limited and uncertain aspirations for the planning and design of the public realm. The challenge is to turn this situation around, and through clear strategic thinking and proactive intervention, to instil a sense of purpose in the planning of public spaces which is nuanced, inclusive and 'enriches' the experience of living in the urban environments that planning and design are able to shape.

Turning to the biosphere, Aleksandra Kazmierczak and Adam Barker explored the relationship between processes of urban development and the concepts of ecological and social resilience, linking back to Michael Hebbert's reference to wayward horses. They argued that models of urbanism in Western Europe have caused the 'fragmentation, displacement or reduction of green space and reduced the ability of urban areas to provide fundamental environmental and social services'. Many past attempts to plan for people and the biosphere have disappointed on both fronts: they were, however, able to identify a small number of 'green infrastructure'

experiments in the UK which are seeking to balance liveability with sustainability. The concept of green infrastructure was seen as a logical step forward on a continuum that includes urban parks and garden cities: it is a means by which human and non-human needs can be brought into greater equilibrium, and is fundamentally concerned with delivering ‘multi-functionality’ spaces that deliver against different but integrated agendas.

But in the final thematic paper of the morning, Professor Chris Allen and Lee Crookes were critical of the extent to which spatial planning and its new policy processes are embracing the views, needs and liveability requirements of ‘ordinary people’: the consumers of government policy and local implementation. They began by questioning professional claims concerning the transformative power of urban policy and planning, arguing that hype and disappointment often go hand-in-hand. But worst still, for many ‘transformed’ communities, the grand schemes of policy makers do not correspond with the more limited expectations of many ordinary people. They argued that many transformations, lauded as bringing about the creation of ‘sustainable communities’, actually ignore what people really want: a cited example was Housing Market Renewal in the city of Liverpool. They concluded their presentation by suggesting that there should be greater scrutiny of professional ambition that tends to violate, rather than correspond with, the wishes of residents in newly ‘shaped’ places. Greater understanding of places is of course essential, but it should be local people who lead in the process of ‘place shaping’ and not simply the policy makers.

After lunch, two final presentations asked how we should measure the success of spatial planning in delivering against the place shaping and liveability agenda. Professor Matthew Carmona and Claudio de Magalhães reported on research undertaken for the DCLG on establishing national standards for local environmental quality. They began by exploring how to define ‘environmental quality’ before moving on to look at the big methodological questions: measurability, objectivity, subjectivity, context-specificity, and the acceptability of any method that sought to reduce or ‘quantify’ what is essentially a subjective evaluation of ‘quality’. Critiquing their own work, they questioned the possibility of agreeing an acceptable national standard of environmental quality, measured through prescribed indicators. They then went on to argue for devolved system of quality measurement with ‘variable definitions’ and flexible benchmarks of ‘acceptability’.

Professor Cecilia Wong’s view was very similar. Government has placed great emphasis in recent years on outcomes and accountability, but the raw material of spatial planning and space shaping – space and place itself – has variable qualities to begin with, making it impossible to achieve standard outcomes. Planning is both a place shaping and a space mediating instrument and will inevitably deliver different results in different places: its focus should be on ‘desirable outcomes’ to be prescribed locally. Based on research for the RTPI and the DCLG, Cecilia argued that fixed indicators should serve as a guide, to be reinterpreted for different contexts: she argued that monitoring frameworks for spatial planning and space shaping should not be grounded in single indicators but in an understanding of how to flexibly combine indicators to ‘yield meaningful policy intelligence and to include “spatiality” in the analysis by emphasising the importance of functional areas and spatial linkages and connections’. Because communities and people are central to place shaping, the monitoring of outcomes should not be the exclusive preserve of statisticians, but rather ‘a communicative and iterative learning’ process that takes place at the heart of policy-making.

Following an open discussion of the issues raised, Vincent Goodstadt, who had chaired the second day, drew the event to a close. The Housing and the Regions Research Network will convene a further event at Leuven in 2009. Details are to be announced.

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