

Calm down, dear

Maybe sacrificing a bit of growth for sovereignty will do London good



Looking down on the City of London from the Shard one has to question the quantity and pace of development. And that's what is just visible above ground.

Sarah Sands, former editor of the *Evening Standard*, writing in the *FT* recently, refers to the Prime Minister's idea of 'rebalancing the economy'. She comments that the correction may happen without her intervention; that London's defence used to be that regional boats would rise on the back of its economic success: "Another way of rebalancing is for London to sink a little. The provinces are basking in sunshine and literary festivals while young creative people I know head for Liverpool, Glasgow and Hull."

On the radio recently Merryn Somerset Webb was listening to a West End estate agent bemoaning the softening at the top end of London's housing market. She commented "What's not to like about that? Housing will be a bit more affordable".

At every level in London the pressure is on with the rising population, a booming economy which barely paused for the economic crisis, and even with an increasing out-migration of young families the population has recently risen from 8.1 to 8.8m people.

Without suggesting that we bring back the Location of Offices Bureau and deliberately depopulate London or undermine its economy, perhaps it's time for a pause for breath and to plan for quality (and tranquility) rather than quantity. ■

The need for a shadow planning system

Why do we need devices like PiP, brown land registers, and PD freedoms?

A study by the Association for Public Service Excellence into permitted development rights (PD) and in particular the right to change office space into housing, describes PD as being "on such a scale as to be in effect a shadow planning system, with no opportunity to secure decent quality housing or contributions for education or even even basic children's play space".

Another study by the RICS, which visited 568 buildings across the country, concludes that only 30 per cent of units delivered through PD meet national space standards.

These are serious concerns that need to be put into a bigger context. First, at a time of economic recession, when these PD rights were introduced, and at a time of a severe housing shortage especially at the lower cost end, permitted development rights have turned out to provide something like 30 per cent of the additional housing achieved and for some local authorities, over half.

This freedom brought with it some collateral damage, be it pressure on small businesses in low-cost accommodation to relocate and in terms of some unusually small dwellings. The benefits included the release of value in terms of better land use, the upgrading of buildings and the provision of relatively low cost housing.

How to mitigate such damage? Well first, standards are objective criteria and therefore much more efficiently handled through the Building Regulations. Time and again it is clear that the building regulation process, which does bite on permitted development, should be able to deal with minimum standards across the board and relieve the planning process and avoid its temptation to tinker with such standards.

It should not be forgotten that the 'nay-sayers' were shouting that nobody would bother with this permitted development right, then that the take-up was negligible, and that the whole thing was pointless. Not quite what they are saying now.

And they haven't learned have they? Planning in Principle (PiP) was given a big analysis in *Planning* which asserts that there has been a very slow take up of this new process and quotes experts saying >>>

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

>>> that this is not likely to change. The article was published on the 6th of July but the PiP regulations were only published on the 15th of June! Is this a repeat case of the system predicting what it wishes for regardless of the evidence?

Why do we need devices like PiP, brown land registers, and PD freedoms anyway? The answer is that the planning process has become so sclerotic and complex and that reform and simplification tend to do the opposite. So the politicians in frustration seem to be subverting the system by introducing a shadow alternative.

If this sounds unlikely, just compare what is required to make an outline planning application today with the original process: a red line on a map, a one-page form and a postage stamp.

Because an outline application is no longer any such thing PiP has been introduced to re-establish the ability on small sites to confirm the principle of development.

Maybe a shadow planning system is not such a bad idea. ■

Aphrodisiac planning

There is a revival in the realisation that local spatial planning, at all scales, is the necessary foundation for good placemaking

Political consensus and planning practice for 40 years have been built on two cardinal policies – fiscal rectitude administered with an iron grip by the centralist Treasury, limiting the autonomy of local authorities, and decreasing emphasis on municipal spatial planning in favour of market forces and quasi-autonomous development corporations.

The 'Coalition' government, and two Tory administrations have had to manage the consequences of systemic failure in the banking system* resulting in Austerity, that has also had a severe impact on planning department capabilities.

Yet we have the ubiquitous neologisms – placemaking and good growth – both of which require local spatial planning, cash and resources to function beneficially for the good of all, not just the few. Inequalities that have arisen from the "failures of success" of neo-liberal, centralised economic policies, have fuelled the Brexit vote, especially in the under-invested North and have eradicated political consensus.

What Cameron's administration did introduce was Going for Growth fiscal policies (whatever happened to the Big Society?) that require councils to approve new development to retain more of the Council Tax and Business Rate income generated from this.

This has encouraged London boroughs to hunt, with increasing urgency, through their property portfolios (the true 'great estates'), including council housing holdings, to find new opportunities.

You can't go to a built environment conference without developers hymning the virtues of placemaking, public-private partnership and community – a chorus of spot-changed leopards. Meanwhile the High Street is dwindling as technology and the inefficient business rating system batter it daily. Housing is nowhere near delivering the 66,000 homes target set by the Mayor – and way too low to tackle a 40-year backlog. Londoners are migrating out again as prices rise in areas where they might have stood a chance of affording a home.

In some places, however, big and small spatial planning is making a comeback. Leaving aside the frustrations for cash-strapped planners administering complex development control functions, there is a revival in the realisation that local spatial planning, at all scales, is the necessary foundation for good placemaking which generates the long-term value the market needs to consider investing and the resources to address inequality.

A big issue for the next generation of placemaking, in the outer boroughs, down the Old Kent Road in Southwark and Lewisham, on Greenwich Peninsula, in Wembley, in Havering – in all these careworn places, is how to flex outdated yardsticks like Use Classes to accommodate rapidly evolving occupancy. Does Build to Rent really need its own use class? Should we be more flexible about High Street uses, Permitted Development Rights, space standards, and a host of other constraints. And on the municipal side of the equation, should we also be investing a lot more in public sector-managed, spatial planning at a strategic and local level, in partnership with private sector promoters?

We need a coherent, whole-industry response to convince whoever is in No.10 and No.11, of the need to enable rapid change through effective, flexible planning.

Planning may be a prophylactic, but it should also be an aphrodisiac. ■

**triggered by President Clinton's enforcement of 'sub-prime' lending*