

More of the same...

... during 25 years in which everything and nothing changed, says Paul Finch

Given the unending complaints about the planning system by politicians, the media, housebuilders amenity societies and Uncle Tom Cobley over the past 25 years, you might be forgiven for thinking that the world of town and country planning has been in the deep freeze, where nothing has changed.

Little could be further from the truth. The fundamental shake-up via the National Planning Policy Framework showed just how flexible and resilient the underlying structures of this UK phenomenon could be. Even before the NPPF, we had delivered a huge chunk of Docklands, the whole of the Olympic Park, and a revitalised City of London office market pretty much within the old framework. Plus Crossrail, High Speed 1 and so on.

Far from marking the end of the world as planners knew it, the NPPF has in a sense taken the system back to basics, that is to say one which clearly sets out how planning should attempt to reconcile the sometimes (but not inevitably) conflicting demands of applicants, residents, elected representatives, and occasionally government itself. Far from being an ignoble activity, or an assault on individual property rights, planning is an activity which would have to be invented if I did not already exist.

Developer Nigel Hugill, who achieved permission for what is now one of London's most successful mixed-use developments at Stratford, points out that it was the result of treating the planning system as the occasion for a conversation not a fight. Several million square feet were approved without a public inquiry, and the permission subsequently became the planning umbrella for London's successful 2012 Olympic Games bid. It was flexible enough not to require a further overall master-plan application, simply detailed plans for Westfield's Stratford City, the Games park, and the Olympic village. And yet. Although the the planning system can rise to the big occasion, why does it so often appear to revert to a default setting, where everything is a problem? A 25-year perspective is helpful here, because we can distinguish between factors that may be inherent in the planning system as devised, and those factors which affect planning and planners but are not about planning as a professional activity.

The most obvious example of this is housing, partly because it seems to have become a chronic problem in London and parts of the South-east, and partly because every report commissioned by government, usually with a bit of prompting, makes recommendations about how planning must be changed/reformed/abandoned if we are ever to achieve the nirvana of decent housing, for everyone not just who lives here now, but may wish to come here in the future.

In these circumstances attacks on planning are not just irrelevant but dishonest. The extraordinary increase in the population of the UK as a whole, and London in particular, as a result of inward migration is the result of political decision-making, or sometimes indecision, by politicians who have misled the public consistently about numbers, either because they are in denial or because they have a political agenda which they think will be helped by millions of extra voters (T. Blair).

I would argue that it is because planning has been ignored that we have a problem about homes and schools and surgeries and hospitals, not because it has failed.

Similarly, stories about planning delay ignore political realities which sometimes themselves depend on stasis. The clearest recent example of this is in relation to airport policy. The background was the planning permission given for a Thames estuary airport in the 1970s, later abandoned by >>>

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

>>> Harold Wilson for entirely political reasons. The idea won't go away, but in typical British fashion, at a time when the country was allegedly 'open for business', David Cameron injected years of delay into reaching a decision about where to expand airport facilities.

His useful idiot, Sir Howard Davies, produced a dodgy dossier which allowed a Conservative government to ditch a policy which was part of a winning election manifesto – not to expand Heathrow. This is pathetic stuff, and it will only be a matter of time before someone claims that it is planning delays that have caused the problem.

We have essentially the same planning system that was in use when we were building enough homes every year; what has changed is the political commitment to actually building public housing instead of making speeches about it. The 180 housing 'initiatives' produced by successive governments this century are evidence of dither and incompetence, not the case for the prosecution against chief planning officers.

There are plenty of detailed criticisms one can make of aspects of UK town and country planning, but they need to be considered in the context of the politics of a relatively sophisticated, relatively rich and relatively crowded country. It is time for politicians to stop taking cheap pot-shots at planners, and start taking development of our individual and collective futures with the seriousness it deserves. ■

The enemy within

Lee Mallett says that planning's real function has become that of prophylactic

The problem with planning, which has only been exacerbated over the last 25 years since the first issue of *Planning in London* magazine (to challenge what Paul Finch says above) is that it does not do what it says on the tin.

This may be because the system has been 'ignored' and abused by politicians, but whatever the reason, it is not really a 'planning' system at all other than in a preventative sense. Like cooking, but with the gas down very low.

The main reason for this transmutation since 1979 has been the cross-party adoption of neo-liberal, free market economics in pursuit of electability, and the demotion of planning because of perceived failures of the post-war consensus that revelled in the larger role of the state. All silver that got melted down by Thatcherism.

But at least that pre-1979 era delivered the number of homes we appeared to need, albeit debauching the economy in the process. Not so since, and that is the chief failure of the 'planning' system. Despite increasing affluence for some, the system hasn't said that we need homes, hasn't encouraged their delivery, and politicians have taken electoral advantage of this failure, colluding with professionals who can only have regarded the problem as someone else's and not theirs.

It was only when the last Census unveiled the true scale of the problem that the scandal began to bite. Of course we're all for lots of new housing now, but the recent 'garden villages' announcement didn't even bother specifying many actual sites. That's pathetic.

Planning's real function became that of prophylactic, unsuccessfully stopping 'bad' things, in the unrealistic hope that 'good' things would materialise unplanned – like the right number of runways. Meanwhile politicians opportunistically cherry-picked major situations to electoral advantage and trampled roughshod over failed local planning – with planning-free enterprise zones in the Isle of Dogs, or London Legacy Development Corporations delivering Olympic Games. Perhaps that was the right and only thing to have done in the circumstances, but it usurped the notion of 'planning' as the tool of local governance.

Policy still does not look to the future much. It relies instead on the private sector to envision this and somehow shoehorn growth – which is what London has been experiencing since the



The Editors doing what they do best (having lunch, here at the RIBA)
Left to Right: Lee Mallett, Paul Finch & Brian Waters

mid-1980s – like an ugly sister’s foot, into the glass slipper of conservationist local borough politics.

There have been few incentives for a depleted, demoralised and under-resourced planning system. Current Tory policy, however, to reward local authorities with increased receipts from an increased rateable base, and the ability to borrow money and develop housing independently once more, look like the beginning of a new era in municipal development.

Maybe planning policy will now evolve to fit a growth agenda, but it does so way too slowly. Look at Tech City. It seems possible that this new kid on London’s block will occupy as much space in, say, 20 years’ time as the financial industry occupies now, which is around 90m sq ft in the City alone. And it is already colonising the City because of shortages in Shoreditch. Money and technology are essential ingredients for any venture anywhere, and why shouldn’t the tech sector be as big and powerful in London as financial services? Where are we making the space Tech needs? I think Stratford High Street might be a good place to start.

London’s planning system, however, will always be way off the pace to capture this growth and encourage it for the benefit of all those East End kids who might benefit sooner rather than later because essentially, in its modus operandi, development control either restricts or retards growth, which makes London less competitive.

Despite 40 years of neo-liberal, free market, deregulatory politics we still aren’t sufficiently liberated from either right or left-wing dogma to be able to properly plan pragmatically for a future staring us in the face. Either we get with the globalisation agenda, or we decline. And we can’t just let the North rot. London needs its national hinterland without which it will be an isolated, weakened city state.

So planning needs a national platform, a national plan, just as it needs a stronger clearer London Plan. It needs to encourage conversations between people and private business that address growth, and it needs to suggest ideas that encourage conversations, rather than relying on dated, uncommunicative policy-speak which does the opposite.

Planning is about ‘what if?’, not development control. The good news is some planners and politicians grasp this and there are shoots of a new integrated approach appearing in places like Croydon, Newham, Barking & Dagenham, Harrow and Hackney, and at the GLA. What about mutually beneficial conversations between say the City Corporation and its impoverished neighbour, Tower Hamlets? Imagine the massive synergies there. But there goes another squadron of flying pigs.

David Cameron could not have been more mistaken when he made his infamous comment about ‘planning being the enemy of enterprise’. If ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ politicians fail to understand the long-term benefits of pragmatic, visionary planning, they are enterprise’s, and the people’s, most insidious enemy. ■

[more >>>](#)

Lee Mallett develops this argument with a case study on page 97

Create new low-cost locations to support this great city

Brian Waters
says London
needs more
cheap land

One aspect of the growing cost of living in London problem is that we are simply running out of the 'poor' areas which have traditionally provided refuge: destinations for start-up and creative businesses affording only low overheads and cheap housing needed for key workers, students, young professionals and immigrant families.

Neighbourhoods not long ago considered outré are now lampooned with French accents to imply their imminent posh-ness, fashionability even: Battérsea, Claam, Nouveau Croix. The wave of gentrification led by creatives in Shoreditch has moved into Hackney and Tower Hamlets but is blocked to the east by the resurgence of Stratford and the Olympic Park. And many of these rising areas are no longer cheap enough to provide the balance and support London needs.

The trend is more than the traditional move out to the suburbs as households form. The inward leap over the Metropolitan Green Belt by commuting executives, once a daily chore but nowadays often a long-distance weekly commute, is showing signs of a reverse. Employers in places like Milton Keynes are finding it easy to seduce talent with the promise of an attractive and affordable living environment.

One response is to create new low-cost locations to support the great city. How might this be achieved? As discussed at the London Planning & Development Forum (minutes page 50), the vast area of the green belt might be classified and its purpose redefined. Rather like agricultural land quality or listed buildings there could be degrees of protection for criteria such as open landscape with public access, and separation of settlements to a zoning with development a possibility subject to NPPF and other material policy considerations.

How might development of the last class of land be cheap I hear you ask. Answer is that all of this land brought into development will be taxed at 100 per cent over [say] twice existing use value so eliminating speculation but retaining some incentive. All development will then again be taxed at 100 per cent over a reasonable return and later transactions similarly but inflation indexed. Infrastructure costs arising from such development can be offset against the tax so as to expedite approved development. Affordable might then actually mean affordable. Discuss. ■



IBP Journalism Awards 2016

MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR
(NON-WEEKLY)
Sponsored by
The Chartered Architects' Company

Winner – *New Civil Engineer*
Runners-up: *The Architects' Journal*,
Planning in London:
“A must-read for all its specialist market”