

More vision, less planning is needed now

Our republishing of 'Non-Plan' should stimulate thinking about the future of planning

It's hard to imagine a quartet of urbanists as prominent or politically diverse as Peter Hall, Cedric Price, Reyner Banham and Paul Barker plotting today to blow up the planning system and replace it with something as subversive as 'Non-Plan' (p49).

Yet 'Non-Plan' is the tool successive Governments have used to get anything done; from Enterprise Zones to Mayoral Development Corporations. The only way to avoid the planning swamp is to drain it, sans consulting the frogs, and temporarily disarm democracy. Little bits of Non-Plan, Chinese-style autocracy, with a bureaucratic fig leaf of democracy in the form of the LLDC, have produced the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park and are about to transform Old Oak Common. Then there will be HS2 and Euston Station, Housing Zones, etc. Hooray for development corporations!

And what about the planning system's most serious failing - its inability to spot 100,000 people extra arriving every year in London and increase the supply of housing if not in time, at least judiciously? Is that not enough reason to put it out of its misery?

Our 'Plan' system, as opposed to Banham Barker Hall & Price's Non-Plan, protects peoples' and professionals' prejudices and interests. It excludes the dynamic creativity that created post-war Britain. But it doesn't do some of the things we need it to now. Starved of funds by politicians who wish to see 'planning' bound in a black box of technical approval, it enables them to hobnob with voters and the market while preserving their status as guardians of social and economic values. Meanwhile anyone under 40 has to rent. How democratic is that?

If we accept the planning system as a brake on rampant capitalism, then we should also recognise circumstances where a more libertarian regime would encourage creativity and enterprise.

In London we have huge areas of low density the planning system has not tackled quickly enough. Take the wider Lower Lea Valley where the QEOP has been created specifically to encourage the regeneration of the East End of London. North, south, east and west of the park are areas whose historical functions have died. Or Old Oak Common and Park Royal. These areas have for decades been in decline but remain home to a vast range of vibrant businesses that rely on cheap, abundant space. In every borough there are similar areas, where industrial and employment use is protected, perhaps reinforced by the 'unsuitability' of the land for other uses – they may lie in a flood plain, and their industrial heritage arose because of the proximity to water. These areas offer the opportunity to reinvent London in new ways. What they don't need is a rigid, slow-moving planning regime that dictates use and appearance.

Banham Barker Hall & Price's Non-Plan, in a grandiose Modernist manner, suggested three huge swathes of southern England should be liberated from planning – Lawrence, Constable and Montagu 'countrys', to the north, east and south of London; a provocative, appealing, political no-hoper.

More modestly, Non-Plan, is perhaps the system we need in London's Opportunity Areas, guided by Development Frameworks and minimal design codes, but much less restriction on uses, and most of all, some 'research by design' to indicate what sort of development might go where, produced by the private sector working with a more creative public sector 'planners'.

It is nugatory to argue that the Lower Lea Valley, or anywhere else, is in a flood plain as a reason for restricting swathes of it to employment uses only. The Netherlands is one large flood plain. We need plan-

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ners, assisted by local people and the market, to transcend land-ownerships and other restrictions and develop new visions for where more flexible developments can take place. If this sounds like an emasculated version of Non-Plan, it is at least pragmatic and more readily achievable. More vision, less planning is needed now to let London be the city it wants to be.

Planning and the amnesia problem

A sensible manifesto might argue not that we need less planning, but we need more

With an election looming, and promises about the future coming thick and fast, it will be worth reviewing propositions made about planning, housing and infrastructure via a filter which tries to exclude amnesia. Most of the ideas and complaints about the 'planning system' made in recent years have conveniently ignored past history, wilfully or otherwise. The recent Farrell Review, which contains much sensible advice, seemed oblivious to the work done by the previous Labour government in respect of the idea of 'place', and the policies towards architecture adopted by various government departments in the early years of the Blair administration.

It will also be worth watching out for suggestions that it is planners who have somehow failed to anticipate housing demand, when in fact it was politicians who were pretending immigration wasn't happening, or applauding it while failing to do anything about the implications for housing, schools, surgeries and hospitals. Even the Conservatives are unlikely to blame planners for the failure to establish a definite airports policy, since they themselves kicked the issue into the long grass via the Davies review, but you never know. Given David Cameron's apparent distaste for planning officers nothing should surprise us.

A sensible manifesto might argue not that we need less planning, but we need more – provided it is smart, pin-pointed to appropriate areas, and proactive/enabling rather than imposing extra doses of development control. All parties have a growth agenda, and all communities have an in-built aversion to development on their doorstep. This should not be a surprise, and in fact helps to justify the necessity of a planning system in a relatively small country. As ever, the question is how to reconcile conflicting demands and views, and how to anticipate future requirements via policies that are designed to flex rather than create straight-jackets. That is what planning should be about.

An unhelpful mixture

Politics and planning

We all have to grit our teeth and endure the banalities of election campaigning in the coming weeks. Town planning has not benefitted from being increasingly politicised; its purpose at the most basic is to guide the allocation of resources to achieve the best use of land. This entails finding a means of stimulating and supporting development, providing some certainty and moderating risk while achieving outcomes of quality for the built environment and satisfying the accommodation needs of the community.

At the extreme this can lead to a stand-off between market forces and social needs, but left free of political prejudices this is less likely. Sadly the words of Peter Rees (see ¡Pillo!) increasingly ring true: "I believe that there is no problem that cannot be made worse by a party politician".