

## Searching for a sustainable Britain

---

In searching for a sustainable Britain, I believe we should not only be looking at what we build here in Britain but also at what we export elsewhere. We need a sustainable British as well as a sustainable Britain. We should quite rightly be concerned that the expansion of British towns and the regeneration of urban centres delivers low-carbon environments in which walking and cycling is the natural choice, one which leads to healthier lifestyles and a more convivial public realm. But we should also make sure that our actions abroad are equally sustainable. Let us not forget that Dubai is very largely the product of British industry – is it something to be pleased with?

My second point is that there are two parts to the quest for British sustainability. There is, of course, the **product**; but there is also the **means of production**. I would like to say something about both.

### THE PRODUCT

Dubai may be excessive but it is not untypical of the quest for global accessibility that has pervaded our professional practice for the last century at least – the desire to be everywhere, faster.

Increased global accessibility has manifested itself profoundly and unsustainably in the physical & spatial form of our cities?

Take Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, for example, a city that grew from a historic, walled settlement, approximately one kilometre in diameter to a low-density, car-dependent sprawl, approximately 60km long and 25km wide, in the space of a few decades.

There are only two ways to handle such sprawl – to keep building motorways, cloverleaf junctions, flyovers and tunnels in a sort of tail-chasing exercise. Or, to put a halt to the process and make a radical shift in thinking. Although, when we were asked to look at the city for the Mayor, the plan we inherited was to construct more highways infrastructure. Today, a process of consultation and design development led to an alternative approach – no more highways building but instead a recycling of fast-moving streets into slow-moving boulevards; one based on a person walking through relatively narrower, shaded, well-paved streets, past shops that trade off both the foot traffic and the vehicle traffic because they face the street and are close to the footfall and the on-street parking.

Hardly rocket science, but conceptually at the other end of the scale from the previous policy, a policy of cars-first that has blighted the towns and cities of its conceptual birthplace – Britain.

Across Britain, the separation of local communities, land uses & individual buildings has created the “commuting society” and, with it, very significant costs on time, energy & health. The loss of **local movement economies** has social and economic, as well as environmental, costs in terms of property crime, personal attack & social isolation.

Of all the impacts on the way we live, the health impact is perhaps the most significant, the most costly and the least well understood. Recent guidance from NICE is an important first step in connecting the separated worlds of public health and town planning. Obesity is the number one target yet it is striking that, when common sense and professional opinion conclude quickly that there must be a connection between the layouts of our towns and cities, the physical activity consequences of these layouts and the ill-health of the population, decent research on this connection is thin on the ground.

Fortunately this isn't stopping local authorities and enlightened developers from acting. Witness the proposals for the Elephant and Castle in central London, where ambitions for low-carbon energy production and consumption are matched by a land use pattern and street layout that puts the pedestrian first.

As the plans for Jeddah and for the Elephant & Castle propose, and as the traditional form of cities shows: where we can still find it, urban movement is a balance between movement at different scales: local as well as global movement. It is about multi-scale activity transacting within a common set of spaces. Most modern cities have lost the balance and become too oriented towards large-scale movement. New urban planning should be about rebalancing places towards local movement.

Unfortunately, too much of what we see proposed – the future urban product – falls far short: buildings that turn their backs to main streets; housing enclaves that isolate homeowners, especially older people and people whose mobility is restricted; shops that can only truly be reached by car.

So if we find fault in Britain's built product, it is a reasonable assumption to draw that there is something wrong with Britain's means of production. So let me turn briefly to look at that.

## THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION

The first thing to be said, I think, is that there is often a disconnect between policy and practice. I believe we have many excellent policy documents: CABE's “By design”, the Home Office's “Safer places”, the HCA's “Urban Design Compendium”. These are heavyweights and have seeded the proliferation at every level of policy that promotes pedestrian-oriented urban environments.

However, while planning policies are written for low carbon our practices are still largely high carbon – there is a gap between saying and doing because planning is a political tool and policy bends to the satisfaction of the electorate. For example, if policy says we should be creating local, pedestrian movement economies why, at the onset of recession, does our attention focus on the plight of car manufacturers?

Or, why is it so difficult to build a high street? When you try to do so, you immediately reveal the disconnects in the means of production – not the policies themselves but the way we go about delivering them.

In terms of practice, we know very well that there is a silo mentality within the built environment professions. We are not good at sharing knowledge. We do not speak each other's languages. Witness the exchange between an architect and a highways engineer - that is if you ever find them talking to each other - it is a conversation laced with a combination of apathy, suspicion and resignation. In both directions. Why would it be otherwise when our education systems, in the main, keep us apart? Segregation breeds ignorance and ignorance breeds indifference and contempt.

A similar disconnect has set in between architects and planners. Once we were one and the same. Now we see ourselves having distinct responsibilities. And, when it comes to sustainability, too many architects see their responsibilities ending at the skin of the building and not beyond into the wider urban setting. "Why should we?" they think "when that is someone else's job". And then they become obsessed with building products in the vain hope that controlling building materials will be enough to deliver sustainability.

**We will not achieve low-carbon living by buildings alone if the carbon reductions achieved in a year of eco-building product specification can be wiped out in an afternoon of lazy, car-dependent masterplanning – and, I believe, they can.**

## CONCLUSIONS

So, in conclusion, my observation is that the quest for global accessibility that created our ring roads and trunk roads - carving up local communities and consigning many to high-energy, health-poor lifestyles - pervades Highways Planning, Town Planning & Architecture to this day. These are the disciplines that manifest social, economic & environmental policy in physical and spatial form and the attitudes of these disciplines, more so than their policies, need to change.

In doing so, our focus must therefore be not only on carbon and on buildings but it must equally be on health, education and local economics. Once the connection is made between low carbon living, healthy living and educational achievement, true sustainability will be possible. This requires a shift, if I may be this bold among friends, from straw bale-thinking. And architects must be part of this because, in them lie great ideas; and because architects, whether we admit it or not, have a responsibility

towards people and not only towards materials. We find it easy to take refuge in eco-buildings; we need to engage with eco-planning.

Thank you.

**Tim Stonor**

Managing Director

**SPACE SYNTAX**

PA **Clare Laws**

T +44 (0)20 7422 7600

[t.stonor@spacesyntax.com](mailto:t.stonor@spacesyntax.com)

[www.spacesyntax.com](http://www.spacesyntax.com)