

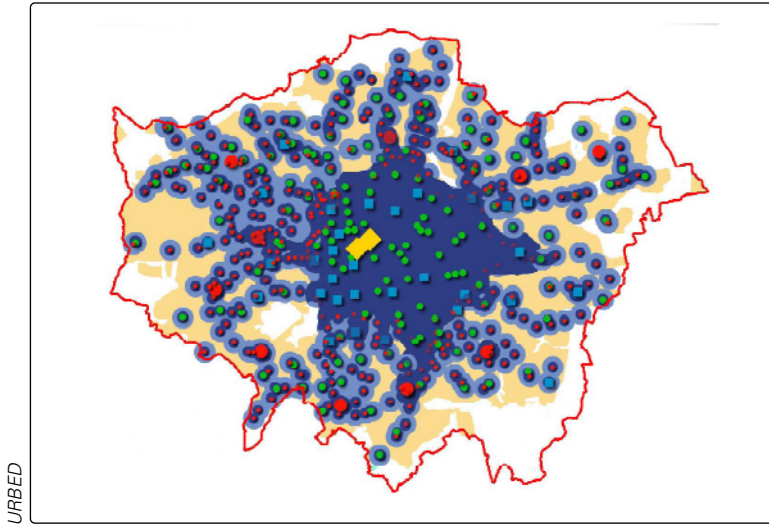
achieving smarter growth in london and the south east

Nicholas Falk considers the challenges facing London's suburbs, and suggests that London could grow better if development efforts were to be concentrated on transport nodes and corridors



URBED

New housing at Brentford Lock, alongside the Grand Union Canal



An indication of the extent of 400 metre (dark blue) and 800 metre (light blue) 'ped sheds' - areas encompassed by the walking distance from a local centre or rail station

London is dynamic and – whatever plans say – will continue to change and grow. The issue is *where* growth should take place, and how the environmental and social as well as economic impacts should be shared between the people and property owners that make up the wider city. Commissioning a new London Plan under a new Labour Mayor provides an opportunity to overhaul the planning toolkit and draw some lessons from places that seem to have succeeded in tackling the problems that concern most people living and working in London.

Over the past ten years I have led study tours for planners to learn from European cities, as well as revisiting New York on a number of occasions. We have been impressed by how the most successful places balance development and infrastructure, and ensure that housing is affordable for all. The conclusions are set out in a series of URBED reports under titles such as *Learning from Paris* or *Learning from Berlin*,¹ as well as in a book I helped Peter Hall to write.²

This short article focuses on the challenges facing London's suburbs, revisiting research that URBED carried out for the Greater London Authority³ to suggest how London could do much better by concentrating efforts on the growth corridors covered elsewhere in this issue of *Town & Country Planning*.⁴

The density dilemma

Despite all the good intentions and volumes of advice, and some notable developments, planning has failed to deliver on some key objectives outside Central London. House prices have outstripped average incomes, congestion has increased, and environmental quality is worsening in the hearts of our communities. Nowhere are the problems more acute than in the many smaller district and local centres afflicted by a combination of retailing trends, demographic shifts, and a lack of public

investment to reconcile cars and pedestrians or cyclists.⁵

With competing proposals, from densifying suburbia to building wherever land is available, and with painfully slow progress on building out the larger brownfield sites, there is an urgent need to reconsider the *shape* of London – in what could be crudely characterised as a debate between those who accept 'fat' cities, where people travel long distances to work, typically by car, and those who aim for 'fit' cities, such as Freiburg, which promotes itself as the '*City of short distances*', in which only a third of trips to work are made by car. In winning the 2014 Wolfson Economic Prize, David Rudlin and I showed⁶ how building new settlements at the edge of existing settlements on sites not yet allocated for housing could achieve what Ebenezer Howard was proposing in his famous diagram of the 'Social City'.

Of course, London is much larger than award-winning cities such as Copenhagen or Stockholm, attitudes to property are very different from those prevailing in German cities, and most London land values are extortionate. Nevertheless, if London is to live up to its claims of being an 'exemplary World City', the new London Plan would benefit from providing policies, as well as tools, for applying best practice. For example, density guidelines on the lines of the well-proven Dutch ABC model would encourage the highest-density developments at locations where transport accessibility is greatest or could be improved. Land value capture could then be used, as the advocates of 'transit-oriented development' suggest, to achieve higher-quality development than is usually feasible, with a mix of uses and tenures.⁷

Smarter growth

The following outlines four proposals that apply such an approach, and which should be tested

against social and environmental as well as economic objectives:

- **Building above railway lines:** While the construction difficulties of working near the railways deter private developers, there are sites – for example west of Ealing station or north of Euston – where property values could support such an initiative. Paris Rive Gauche is a very large mixed-use development on a new structure above the lines running from the Gare d'Austerlitz out to the Périphérique, the equivalent of London's North Circular.

By stopping HS2 at Old Oak Common, and rethinking Crossrail 2, resources could be released to build highly connected commercial centres similar in scale to Canary Wharf. Development Corporations, as at Old Oak Common, could then ensure the right mix of public and private funding and secure a long-term and holistic perspective. The important message for strategic planning is to evaluate strategic alternatives or scenarios before too much is committed to detailed work, taking up the recommendations of, for example, Foresight or the Eddington Review.

- **Developing under-used land near stations:** There are still under-used sites near suburban railway stations, for example at Surbiton, where proactive planning briefs are called for to achieve a mix of uses and tenures. Some of the best opportunities lie along the Paddington Arm of the Grand Union Canal, which runs out to Uxbridge, and where much of the land alongside is degraded. Similar sights can be seen along the old Great Eastern railway lines running out from Liverpool Street. Developments such as Chiswick Park and South Acton show how quality can be achieved, as a report from the London Society shows.⁸ But too often speculation and the difficulties of reaching agreement lead to such sites being under-used for decades – good examples being provided by Southall Gasworks and land alongside the Grand Union Canal in Hillingdon and by case studies set out in a new report from the Centre for London.⁹

In some cases, the threat of using compulsory purchase powers may be effective, but better still would be the introduction of a form of site value rating, as in Copenhagen. Significantly, the uplift in land values from a new town at Örebro has been used to fund the first line of Copenhagen's Metro. Many of the best opportunities lie near town centres and suburban stations, where planned intensification should provide the kinds of homes needed to attract older people out of under-occupied semis and into small apartment blocks with parking below and large balconies. Not only would this help to cater for the growing elderly population, but it would breathe new life and spending power into failing centres. The

houses that are released might usefully be acquired by a housing association and used to house young families, possibly through the kind of intensification recommended in the *Supurbia* report.¹⁰

- **Opening new railway lines:** There are parts of London, particularly in the west, where car usage and congestion is high, and public transport accessibility levels are relatively low. Yet these are near the very areas with most private sector jobs and economic growth potential. A new 'West London Orbital' light railway could expect to repeat the success of the Overground, which has increased usage by at least four times. An easier starting point is the freight-only line from Southall to Brentford, where a lot of high-quality housing is already being built overlooking the Grand Union Canal basin.

But a more ambitious scheme would utilise what is left of the disused railway line from West Drayton to Uxbridge and then running to Rickmansworth through the wastelands of the Colne Valley, and might be linked to a redesigned 'West London Tram' to tie isolated areas together.

If such a scheme were to be linked to developing a new country or water park to match that developed along the River Lea, support could well be secured for planned development in what is currently the Green Belt. By capturing the uplift in land values from building new housing, London could achieve the quality of development found in places such as Hammarby Sjöstad on the edge of Stockholm or HafenCity in Hamburg.¹¹ Such developments could form a 'string of pearls' that would boost the image of what is currently a largely ignored area around Heathrow, and thus appeal to existing residents as well as newcomers.

A new orbital rail project is likely to yield far better returns than some current ambitious rail projects, such as Crossrail 2, without all the disruption involved in digging up the Euston Road. The important point is that the new London Plan needs not only to consider different growth scenarios, but also to evaluate transport and development options using multiple criteria analysis, not just crude cost-benefit ratios.

Inspiration can readily be drawn from the plan for Grand Paris, with all its new tram and metro lines, or the new park planned to run alongside the right bank of the Seine to the east of Paris to supplement all those that have already been developed on former industrial sites, such as the Parc de Bercy.

- **Creating a new Garden City for London:** The final idea applies the thinking that won URBED the 2014 Wolfson Economics Prize⁶ by proposing a site for a new Garden City within London's boundaries. Of course, this should ideally be part of a new string of settlements aimed at bringing



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Örebro new town
in Copenhagen

Howard and Abercrombie's visions up to date, but a start needs to be made somewhere. Airfields, while offering sites that are large enough, often suffer from poor accessibility. But Northolt Aerodrome in Hillingdon is served by three Underground stations, and the A4 runs alongside. It is no longer considered safe to use, and it should be relatively easy to find another airfield for use by visiting dignitaries and the royal family.

The benefits of a highly visible site where all the principles that the TCPA has drawn up for building sustainable 'eco-towns' could be applied would be enormous.¹² The experience could be used to promote British expertise to other countries, as well as illustrate to housebuilders what they should be aiming for. Indeed, such a scheme might be part of the compensation required for any further development at Heathrow.

By creating new lakes as part of the development, as for example Vienna has done in redeveloping its old airport, the problems of occasional flooding could be relieved. Indeed, by holding on to more of the water that flows into the River Colne and the Thames through extensive tree planting, the Thames Tunnel may no longer be needed to cope with occasional 'water events', thus saving every London household around £80 a year. This example shows the importance of the new London Plan having an economic as well as social and environmental dimensions to it.

Leading the way

The next London Plan should be a model for strategic planning in the 21st century. Planning in the UK has been widely discredited as an obstacle to good development. Hence it is important that the

new London Plan shows how proactive planning can be made to work for everyone's benefit, while facing up to the realities that any collapse in investment confidence will entail. This depends on cracking the fundamental obstacle of land by identifying *strategic sites* where different rules would apply.

Study tours such as those to Stockholm and Helsinki have shown that it is not so much the excellence of the architects as the way that land is brought forward that leads to high-quality or sustainable development. The Greater London Authority should add its support to changes already under consideration as far as land values are concerned, starting with sites that Transport for London owns. It could then propose a new approach to rating that penalises those who hold key sites vacant or in under-use. Finally, it could work with long-term investors to provide low-cost, long-term finance for local infrastructure and affordable housing, thus avoiding over-reliance on government largesse.

London owes it to the rest of the UK to release limited national funds for schemes that rebuild the economic base of Northern cities, and that help to restore the nation's worn-out infrastructure. The way that this could be done has already been set out in a previous article in *Town & Country Planning* that advocated some kind of 'Municipal Investment Corporation'¹³ to assess projects before they were funded through bonds. A report published by the Smith Institute illustrates how the idea works in France, the Netherlands and Germany.¹⁴

If this approach were linked, as in Paris, to the funding of feasibility studies for projects put forward by the London boroughs for incorporation in the London Plan, we could see the revival of strategic



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Wild landscape at Paris Rive Gauche

planning without the need for further legislation. By evaluating projects against multiple criteria, not just travel savings, we can make limited investment funds go further. Indeed, by requiring projects to apply the kinds of principles or tools needed for sustainable development, London could once again be leading the way.¹⁵

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Notes

- 1 See the URBED website, at www.urbed.coop
- 2 P. Hall, with contributions from N. Falk: *Good Cities, Better Lives: How Europe Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism*. Routledge, 2014
- 3 *A City of Villages: Promoting a Sustainable Future for London's Suburbs*. URBED, with the TCPA, for the Greater London Authority, 2002. <http://urbed.coop/sites/default/files/City%20of%20Villages%20Report.pdf>
- 4 C. Swain: 'Applying polycentricity to the new London Plan'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2016, Vol. 85, Aug., 307-11
- 5 *Over the Edge? Town Centres and the Economy*. URBED, for North London Strategic Alliance and West London Alliance, 2008. [www.westlondonalliance.org/WLA/wla.nsf/Publications/WPB-248/\\$file/081021-town-centres-repfinal-web.pdf](http://www.westlondonalliance.org/WLA/wla.nsf/Publications/WPB-248/$file/081021-town-centres-repfinal-web.pdf) (see also N. Falk: 'Over the edge: town centres and the London economy'. *Planning in London*, 2008, Issue 67 (Oct.-Dec.). Available at <http://urbed.coop/sites/default/files/Over%20the%20Edge%20Article.pdf>)
- 6 D. Rudlin and N. Falk: *Uxcester Garden City*. Submission for the 2014 Wolfson Economics Prize. URBED, Jun. 2014. <http://urbed.coop/projects/wolfson-economic-prize>

- 7 H. Suzuki, J. Murakami, Y.-H. Hong and B. Tamayose: *Financing Transit-Oriented Development with Land Values: Adapting Land Value Capture in Developing Countries*. World Bank Group, 2015. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/21286>
- 8 J. Manns and N. Falk: *City in the West: Reshaping Greater London*. The London Society (forthcoming)
- 9 S. Sims and N. Bosetti: *Stopped: Why People Oppose Residential Development in their Back Yard*. Centre for London, Jul. 2016. http://centreforlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CFLJ4503_STOPPED_WEB_V2.pdf
- 10 B. Derbyshire and R. Oosthuizen: 'Supurbia: intensifying London's suburbs'. *Urban Design*, 2016, Issue 138 (Spring). Available from the HTA website, at www.hta.co.uk/news/posts/supurbia-intensifying-londons-suburbs
- 11 *Beyond Eco-towns: Applying the Lessons from Europe*. PRP/URBED/Design for Homes, Oct. 2008. www.futurecommunities.net/files/images/1_3_Beyond_Eco-towns.pdf
- 12 See the TCPA's Eco-towns Worksheets, available at www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/sustainability-worksheets.html
- 13 N. Falk: 'Funding large-scale new settlements'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2014, Vol. 83, Apr., 183-8
- 14 N. Falk: *Funding Housing and Local Growth: How a British Investment Bank Can Help*. Smith Institute, Jun. 2014. <https://smithinstitutethinktank.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/funding-housing-and-local-growth.pdf>
- 15 The Toolkit URBED prepared for the last Labour administration in June 2006, *Tomorrow's Suburbs Best Practice Guide: Tools for Making London's Suburbs More Sustainable*, has seven themes and plenty of examples and references to good practice to help overcome the shortage of experienced planners. It is available from the URBED website, at <http://urbed.coop/sites/default/files/GLA%20Sustainable%20Suburbs.pdf>