

SMARTER GROWTH: Growing historic cities

A packed symposium in Oxford's Kellogg College drew members of the Historic Towns Forum ranging from St Albans to Wells and York, together with a large contingent from Oxford. The aim was to learn from success, and to debate the principles that would lead to sustainable or 'smarter growth' that does not outstrip infrastructure capacity. Presentations on Grenoble and Freiburg provided an international dimension, and Nicholas Falk, one of the co-organisers drew out lessons from four other European cities acclaimed by the Academy of Urbanism, including Montpellier and some Dutch examples. Responses from the Leaders of both Oxford City and South Oxfordshire rounded up the event. The proceedings have been filmed so the conclusions can be shared more widely (www.urbed.coop).

1. Traffic-free city centres

All the leading French 'knowledge economy' cities have freed their centres from traffic by investing in tram systems, and Grenoble led the way. Pierre Kermen, former Deputy Mayor for Grenoble, has been a key person in the city's move towards sustainability since 2001. He argued that the vision now has to be sustainable, frugal and inclusive, as cities have to do more with less. This means speeding up regeneration projects to cut project management costs. It also involves mixing new high density housing with technopoles, developed around tram line extensions.

Craig McWilliam from Grosvenor, who sponsored the symposium, explained how historic cities like Freiburg funded better infrastructure through their growth as 'cities of short distances' or compact cities with denser development. Land ownership holds the key, and he cited Barton Park, where the partnership between Grosvenor and Oxford City Council is enabling the City to grow on the

edge. Professor Danny Dorling showed how historic cities were leading the way in terms of cycling, which is one of the best ways of reducing carbon emissions and promoting healthier life styles. Though Oxford had a long way to go in freeing up space so that cycling was safe for all, and matched international standards such as in Copenhagen, giving cycling the necessary priority was relatively straightforward, given the will.

2. Economic balance and social inclusion

Shaun Spiers from the CPRE asked how economic growth could be spread or contained so that cities did not overheat. The workshop on ‘economy’ concluded that quality of life is the key to their success, and a ‘quality of life’ shopping list or audit needs to cover the whole city, not just the historic centre. Professor Gilles Novarina from Grenoble provided useful maps which show how the French knowledge based economy is concentrated in historic cities with good infrastructure, such as local trams and high-speed rail links to other cities.¹ He also showed that whilst the knowledge economy is a key to success in historic cities, it does not suffice. A city’s economy must be diverse.

Patsy Dell, the new head of planning at Oxford, drew on Cambridge’s success in joining up development and infrastructure, which is why strategic planning needs to go beyond city boundaries. For example the University is developing a high quality mixed use scheme on land taken out of the green belt in North West Cambridge. Economic diversification is essential, for example by growing SMEs, and addressing the skills deficit. Oxford is particularly polarised, and historic cities need to do better at all levels of education. Nicholas Falk drew on case studies of great European cities from the Academy of Urbanism’s award scheme. He pointed out how San Sebastian had invested in education and

¹ Gilles Novarina et al Technopolis, Metropolis, or both? A case study of Grenoble, France

research to support manufacturing businesses in the Northern Basque part of Spain, while a high quality light rail system has helped overcome spatial inequalities.

3. Sustainable urban form and spatial growth plans

Louise Wyman from the Homes and Communities Agency showed how garden cities, towns and villages could be ‘reimagined’ in many ways, drawing inspiration for example from the way Kings Cross was being transformed. The HCA is assessing over fifty responses, which come from all parts of the country. David Rudlin drew out lessons from URBED’s Wolfson Prize winning submission for the imaginary city of Uxcester, and the principles are now being applied to places as different as Sheffield, Wisbech and York. As well as turning the constraints of hills or waterways into assets, as Grenoble has done, cities need to map their historic roots and make the most of them.

Smarter Growth requires a spatial growth plan for the ‘functional urban area’ that links development with infrastructure capacity and environmental constraints. The green belt is perhaps better seen as a green web, with memorable views from within the city, as well as from outside. The key distance for new settlements is six miles or ten kilometres for good public transport is to be viable, and a target might be a city where most trips can be made in half an hour. A group of urban designers and planners from the Academy of Urbanism have been working on how to make the most of the 200 acres around Oxford Station, and David Rudlin unveiled the resulting plan for joining the two sides together. The two Council Leaders agreed on the importance of looking at transport in Central Oxfordshire from a sub-regional perspective, which needs much more investment than is currently available.

4. Land value capture and municipal leadership

David Rudlin had emphasised the central importance of land value capture - "*the quality of what we build is an economic issue*" and essential if new housing was to be made affordable. However asked how government policy was developing on this issue Louise Wyman said that it was an important and sensitive one but that no decisions had yet been reached. So historic cities like Oxford and Cambridge could well serve as models, given the importance placed nationally on making access to housing easier, and the need for new financial and organisational models to break down the barriers to smarter growth.

Patsy Dell stressed the need for a clear vision that covers quality as well as quantity. However ***'lack of control and certainty of funding and management of infrastructure is the greatest threat to successful delivery'***. Councillor Bob Price had earlier pointed out that Grenoble has a budget that is six times that of Oxford City, even though they are of a similar size. So how are English cities to mobilise enough finance to convince their residents of the benefits from planned growth? South Oxfordshire is drawing £8 million a year from the Community Infrastructure Levy, but that is a fraction of what is needed. One answer is tapping the uplift in land values to plough back in better infrastructure with benefits for all, as Copenhagen has done so well. The changes to land compensation for land assembly in the new Neighbourhood Planning Bill should help by setting aside 'hope value'. Another source is making a charge on employers, as the French do with their Versement Transport, or as Nottingham has done through taxing Employer Parking to help fund its new tram lines

In their responses to the reports of the workshops, two important Council Leaders suggested that progress was at last being made. Councillor Bob Price for the City wants a transport plan for Central Oxfordshire that can link up with national priorities, and tap the digital revolution. Councillor Cotton for South

Oxfordshire doubted the feasibility of cutting travel times to 30 minutes, but liked the equivalent of Enterprise Zones for developing locations that were well-served by transport.

Conclusions

Whatever the political differences, everyone seemed to agree on the crucial importance of municipal leadership to the future success of historic cities- or what might be called Smarter Growth. Those who have examined the Cambridge model have been struck by the merits of evaluating alternative patterns of growth –some seven in all – against a set of multiple criteria, not just housing numbers.

Craig McWilliam pointed out at the start that ‘*great leaders have brilliant people beside them*’. So if our historic cities are to achieve their potential, a crucial first step is pooling their expertise, tapping the concerns and interests of their communities, and sharing good practice. This depends on Council planning and development departments being properly resourced, or some form of public private partnership, perhaps through development corporations, that could accelerate the development of key sites. This symposium was generally seen as providing useful inspiration which should be shared more widely. In particular the lessons from successful European historic cities could well provide a manifesto for the English equivalents. Using the five Cs of the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth these might be:

1. **Character**; enhance fine buildings and places
2. **Community**: narrow social differences
3. **Connectivity**: tame the car and put pedestrians and cyclists first
4. **Climate-proofing**; join up town and country and save natural resources
5. **Collaboration**: work in partnership to generate innovation and good jobs.

Grenoble has transformed its position from the principal Technopole or centre for science based industry, to an attractive metropolis over the last three decades. It now attracts more students than either Oxford or Cambridge, and 22,000 are working on research. Growth has been focussed around the extensive tramway system, using the concept of ZACs or Zones d'Aménagement Concerté. The City Council works with other members of the agglomeration, (equivalent to our counties), and the wider transport authority, with a mission of being '*sustainable, frugal and inclusive.*' The lessons learned from regeneration projects are fed into subsequent ones. Today, the aim is to strengthen the links between the various parts of the city. Public transport, in particular the tramways, is key to the city's success.

Dr Nicholas Falk September19