

Shaping better and healthier cities

At a time when local authorities seem to have so little power Nicholas Falk AoU looks at how cities can shape their future.

The National Audit Office's report assessing the government's performance on building new homes concludes that local authorities should not take the blame when so much is outside their control¹. The report rightly recommends looking at the way infrastructure is financed, as this is not only critical to overcoming local objections but exceeds the cost of constructing each new house².

However, national investment in infrastructure has long been only half the equivalent in France or Germany, and the National Infrastructure Commission reckons that only a little over 40 per cent can come from taxation, with private finance covering

the rest. The Policy Exchange and McKinsey both estimated £500bn is needed simply to tackle the backlog, so most government offers of capital funding are quite inadequate, based as they are on backing particular projects, like Crossrail, rather than funding investment programmes from which an economic return might be expected^{3,4}. Therefore, we need to learn from what successful cities in other countries do.

As I have argued in reports for the UK2070 Commission and recently for the TCPA on *Sharing the Uplift in Land Values*, faster growing economies give local authorities greater powers to join up development and infrastructure⁵. Rebalancing Britain depends in shifting

the way we tax or charge wealth, which is a more fundamental question than how to double the amount of housing we build each year.

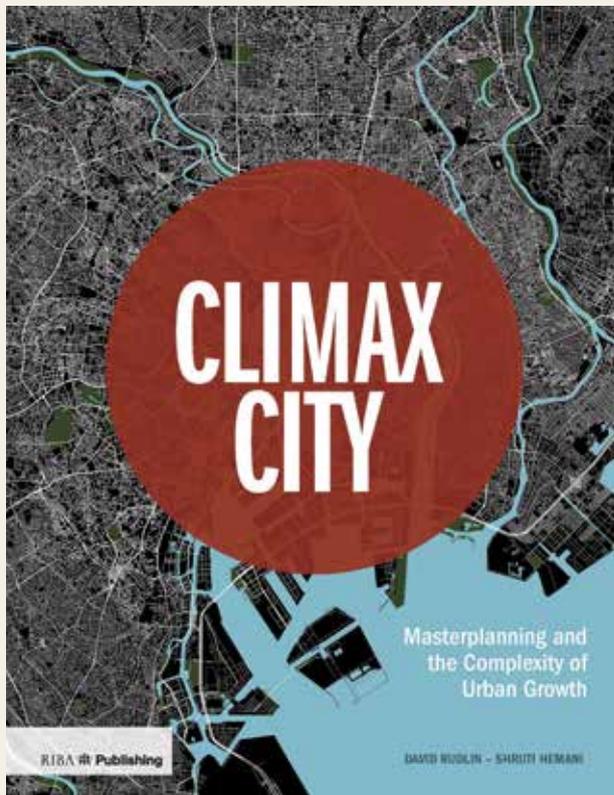
Award-winning cities such as Copenhagen, Freiburg or Vienna are among the happiest places to live and work because they are much more equal, with much lower housing costs. Public transport plus cycling accounts for two-thirds of journeys to work, which seems almost inconceivable outside cities such as London where the car generally dominates. This is because local authorities have much more control over land, and take the lead in promoting urban extensions, which are much healthier as well as more sustainable than our car-based housing estates⁶. So could part of the answer lie in how we grow our mid-sized towns and cities with most potential? A series of books and reports offer useful evidence.

Climax cities

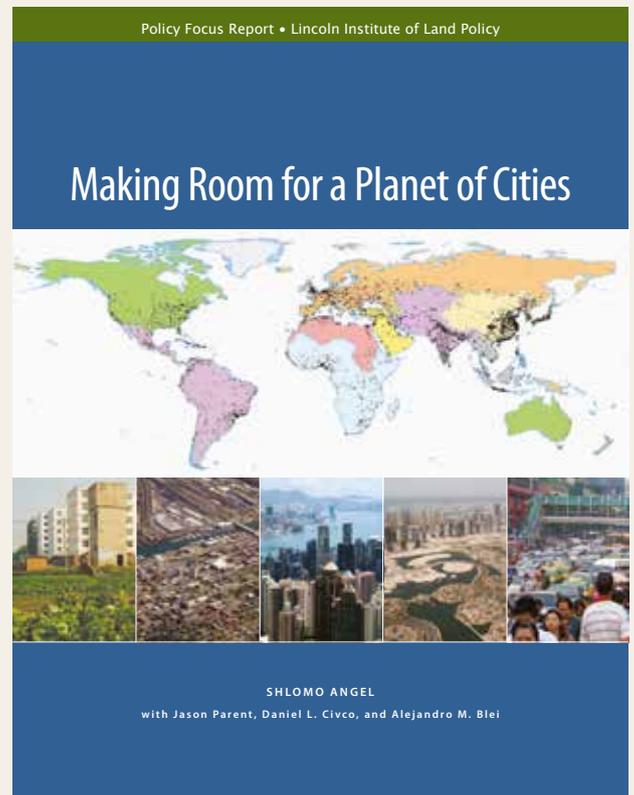
Politicians as well as planners should pay attention to the sobering conclusions in a new book by David Rudlin AoU and Shruti Parikh based on their exhaustive analysis of figureground plans at a series of scales from cities around the world. The book illustrates half of the 35 cities they have examined. The most interesting plans in my view are the Trellis Plans that take a 10 km radius or 4,000 ha area around the centre, and which contrasts buildings with the ground and green space⁷. The most recent cities such as Milton Keynes are the most wasteful of

Trumpington Meadows, Cambridge





Climax City by David Rudlin AoU and Shrutti Hemani



Making Room for a Planet of Cities by Shlomo Angel

space (unlike the cities we enjoy most, such as Paris). This is because priority was given to getting around fast by private car when MK's Development Corporation departed from the original principles set out in the Llewellyn Davies masterplan. By contrast, it is much more attractive to cycle in Copenhagen where parking provision has been cut back, or to use public transport in most continental cities with greater densities.

Getting into shape

As well as densities or floor area ratios, urbanists need to understand the 'urban form' or shape that cities take as they grow (or decline), as this is something that planners can influence through investment in public transport. Fat cities with holes in the middle, like Detroit, inevitably lead to longer and more expensive journeys to jobs while trapping the poor in the worst places. A free download from NYU-based expert on urban development Shlomo Angel brings together statistical data on over a hundred cities round the world in *Making Room for a Planet of Cities*⁸. He considers factors such as density and dispersal, as well as what he calls the 'fragmentation of city footprints', and his conclusion is that there is simply not enough room in cities in emerging economies such as in Asia to handle the projected population expansion. He rejects the model of the European

'compact city' in favour of planned growth on the edges by investing in advance in the land needed to build a peripheral kilometre grid, which incidentally was the model used in Milton Keynes.

A very different view is taken by architect Brian Love, whose book, *Connected Cities*, makes the case for growing towns and cities along the existing railway lines. He has demonstrated the potential of areas surrounding London, such as Hertfordshire, where many of the original garden cities and new towns are located.

Another useful picture is provided in Professor Michael Batty's latest book on the future of smart cities⁹. Mike is particularly interested in geometric relations, such as the 'fractal city', and recognises, like Shlomo Angel, that land area requirements can far exceed the growth in population. He praises URBED's Uxchester Garden City model, which updates Ebenezer Howard's original diagrams, and offers a range of other models. However, he concludes that it is impossible to know what the future will bring. Not only are so many different factors at work, but who can say what values will ultimately prevail?

Yet, as the science fiction writer William Gibson wisely observes: 'The future is already here; it is just

not evenly distributed'. Cities, like companies, compete for investment, and can learn from each other. So with the benefit of having visited and given awards to so many cities and places, what could the Academy of Urbanism contribute? One modest set of suggestions is set out in a timely report, principally drawn up by Jon Rowland AoU but with a lot of help from other urbanists¹⁰. The report proposes adopting a simple set of principles, with four recommendations to:

1. Reform strategic planning
2. Raise the standard of design
3. Open up new markets
4. Make housing affordable

A practical example comes from Cambridge, which my recent review ten years after the Quality Charter and related panel were launched, shows is well accepted by the development industry. Indeed, the Southern Fringe includes recent housing that could have come from the Netherlands¹¹. However, a cautionary book from World Bank economist and planner Alain Bertaud combines economics and urbanism to question whether planners can do much to change market trends and consumer behaviour. The most desirable cities such as Vancouver, Melbourne and San Francisco have price-to-income ratios for housing that are twice those of sprawling cities such as Atlanta and Dallas, while London

and New York come in the middle. He concludes that the best way of making housing affordable is to focus on transport, and that artificial constraints such as green belts or density ratios are counterproductive.

Achieving good urban form

With so many pressures on planning, and so little power to combat the forces of either money or traffic engineering, how can urbanists enable towns and cities to change direction? Here are four suggestions from my own experience of learning from cities that have transformed large areas, and others can be found in Charles Landry's excellent booklet *Cities of Ambition*¹².

Start with connectivity

Instead of infrastructure following on from development it should play a leading role in planning where new development is located and how car dependence can be minimised. The experience of how the Netherlands planned a hundred VINEX new suburbs is particularly relevant, as those who attended the AoU Congress in Eindhoven can testify. As there are some 2,500 railway stations, plus perhaps another 150 where a new station could be justified, by focussing at first on land within 400 km of the station, a transformation could be achieved.

Measure what counts

Too often quality suffers because it is intangible and hard to value, like

truth and justice. But the components can be identified and analysed, as Tim Pharoah is suggesting in a checklist produced for *Transport for New Homes*. By simply starting with the principles of holding car mileage constant, as Freiburg successfully did, a modal shift could be achieved which would be healthier for all.

Learn from what works

The most effective way of changing attitudes is to take mixed groups to places that face similar challenges but that have adopted different solutions. A good example is the Joseph Rowntree Housing Foundation's scheme at Derwenthorpe, which benefitted before it was built from the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods Network, but also from a visit to some Dutch new planned suburbs¹³.

Go for fishbones, not grids

The final idea, which the URBED Trust is developing as a research project with the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis is to design sustainable urban neighbourhoods that support both public transport and walking or cycling, rather than car use. Can the rapidly growing and aspirational middle class in countries such as India be persuaded to share cars or public transport? It would be interesting to get others views on this under-researched subject.

Dr Nicholas Falk AoU is executive director of The URBED Trust



1. National Audit Office, *Planning for New Homes*, February 2019
2. Nicholas Falk, *The Steps towards Quality Growth: towards a new business model for housebuilding*, report for Cambridgeshire Horizons, 2010
3. National Infrastructure Assessment, 2019
4. Dieter Helm et al, *Delivering a 21st Century Infrastructure for Britain*, Policy Exchange 2009
5. Nicholas Falk, *Sharing the Uplift in Land Values: a better system for funding and delivering housing growth*, Town and Country Planning, August 2019: urbedtrust.com/sharing-the-uplift-in-land-values-tcpa-policy-paper
6. *Transport for New Homes Project and Summary*, 2018 www.transportfornewhomes.org
7. David Rudlin and Shruti Parikh, *Climax City: masterplanning and the complexity of urban growth*, RIBA 2019
8. citeseerx.ist.psu.edu.
9. Michael Batty, *Inviting Future Cities*, MIT 2018
10. AoU housing report
11. *Refreshing the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth*, urbedtrust.co.uk
12. charleslandry.com/blog/cities-of-ambition
13. *Solutions: how can local authorities build sustainable urban neighbourhoods*, 2012, JRF and URBED Trust