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Think Piece:

The Historic Town and the Garden City

David Rudlin

The debate over Garden Cities can become a little polarised at times. On the one hand there are the Garden City advocates, suburban in outlook, suspicious of cities and nervous about town cramming. On the other hand there are the urbanists; focused on cities, suspicious of suburbs and nervous about sprawl. Most of the time we are clear to which of these camps we belong, but since winning the 2014 Wolfson Prize URBED has found itself in unfamiliar company.

The towns and cities of the British Isles are however more complicated than this simplistic debate would suggest. In addition to the big cities where much of the debate has focused there are hundreds of smaller towns and cities where the issues are very different. In these places the traditional debates about inner cities and suburban sprawl do not really apply. Many are popular places to live with intense pressures for housing development and a growing economy. Others are more isolated and have seen the decline of traditional industries. These twin concerns of growth or decline characterise much of the work of the Historic Towns & Villages Forum.

In URBED's submission for the Wolfson Prize we chose to explore these issues by focusing on the fictional city of Uxcester. With a population of around 200,000 this is perhaps a small city rather than a market town. As its name suggests it was founded by the Romans and as a fortified river crossing. We imagined that it had later become a Saxon burh when its walls were rebuilt and its Cathedral consecrated

while the associated abbey operated a busy inland port, trading in the local produce of the surrounding church lands. Later the Normans built a castle on what was then the edge of the town to ensure the loyalty of its inhabitants. Much later the monastery was dissolved by Henry VIII but its ecclesiastical college developed into a university making it one of the oldest learning institutions in the country. By the 1960s the university had relocated to a peripheral landscaped campus specialising in science and technology. Meanwhile the nineteenth century had seen the town bypassed by the worst excesses of the industrial revolution although it did develop specialities in leather-making, shoe manufacture and food processing. The nineteenth century also gave it a slightly overblown railway station and a fine legacy of factory buildings and grain mills which are now obsolete. Sound familiar? We counted around 40 places like Uxcester in England from Durham, Carlisle and York in the north to Exeter Taunton and Salisbury in the south, places that represent a very particular form of English urbanism. Since winning the prize we have had conversations with many of the places that we listed as well as many others both larger and smaller interested in the arguments that we put forward.

These arguments were essentially that to build the 250,000 homes that we need as a nation every year we must, of course, be building far more homes within our large cities. For many years we had a policy that 60% of new homes should go within existing urban areas and this is probably about right. However when this target

was in place, prior to the NPPF, much of the focus was on the brownfield 60% with very little thought given to the 40% that would go on greenfield land. In our essay we therefore asked where we should be building the 100,000 homes a year that we should be building outside urban areas? Suburban sprawl is obviously not a good idea, but then again neither is a freestanding Garden City.

Building a new settlement in a distant field is unlikely to be sustainable no matter how beautifully it is designed. Sustainable places need a range of shops, workplaces and facilities to provide for the needs of their residents. They need schools, colleges and preferably a university, a mainline railway station at the heart of an efficient public transport system, together with a decent town centre with a good range of leisure and cultural facilities. Milton Keynes, the largest of our New Towns, cannot quite tick off this list after forty years so what chance would we have with a modern Garden City? Rather than try and establish such a vulnerable sapling, we suggested that we should grow our Garden City from the strong rootstock of an existing place - somewhere like Uxcester that has had all of these facilities, and more, for centuries.

This, you might imagine, would horrify the good people of Uxcester and the forty places that we suggested were a bit like it. Some people it is true have been horrified, but this has not been the general response. There is a debate about whether historic towns and cities really need to grow. There are some who would put up a sign

saying that the town is full and argue that growth should be directed elsewhere. This however has consequences, it pushes up house prices and employers find that they cannot recruit, while people are forced to live further away, commuting in and adding to congestion. Those that accept the need for growth have generally agreed with our suggestion that, rather than allow towns and cities to sprawl, or to export their new housing to all their surrounding villages, they should build properly planned Garden City extensions in the spirit of Edinburgh New Town, Bath, or indeed Bloomsbury all of which were built on green fields. We showed that Uxcester could double its population by using just 6-8% of its green belt.

This is something that they manage to achieve on the continent in historic cities like Freiburg but we have completely lost the ability to do in the UK. Instead we have an adversarial planning system run by embattled planning authorities faced with well-funded planning consultants, land agents, barristers and developers all focused on unlocking the huge land values generated when planning permission for housing is granted. It is a process in which there is very little discussion about where and what we should be building. It is no wonder that the citizens of places like Uxcester are wary of new housing development because much of it is so poor. However if we could create a plan-led system in which we can have an informed discussion about the merits of different types and locations for development, and if we could capture part of the land value generated by this development so that we

can invest in new infrastructure and public transport, then maybe we could achieve something very different. This would allow historic towns like Uxcester to expand in a way that reinforced the existing city centre, invested in much needed public transport and provided new schools and facilities.

When we talk about this, the overwhelming response is that it makes perfect sense but is of course completely impossible. The reality is that at the moment this is probably true, however it wouldn't take much to change this reality through legislation. All of the indications at the time of writing are that this could happen in the next parliament, whoever is elected. The citizens of Uxcester and other places like it should be getting themselves ready.

David Rudlin manages URBED (Urbanism Environment and Design) and also a director of the URBED Trust. He is a planner by training and started his career with Manchester City Council with responsibility for the early stages of the redevelopment of Hulme.

David won the 2014 Wolfson Economic Prize, answering the question 'How would you deliver a new Garden City which is visionary, economically viable, and popular?'

David was a member of the CABE design review committee from 2002 to 2005 and a trustee of CUBE (the Centre for the Understanding of the Built Environment) in Manchester from 1999 to 2005. He is Chair of Beam in Wakefield, joint Chair of the Sheffield Design Panel and a founder Academician of the Academy for Urbanism, of which he is the current Chair.