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**A 21st Century
Historic City:**

Historic Towns and Green Belt Issues

Jon Rowland

Introduction

The issue of how historic cities, especially those bound by tight political and other boundaries, can extend their economic base and maintain themselves for future generations is the subject of this paper. One of the starting points is the Wolfson Economics Prize which showed Government how to build a Garden City with minimal public sector investment. In essence the prize winning submission said:¹

- It is not viable to start from scratch to build a Garden City in the middle of the countryside as the investment in infrastructure is huge;
- It makes sense economically, socially, educationally and infrastructurally to link development to an existing city or market town;
- The report set out an imaginary scenario to establish the main principles and used Oxford as an example to see how these principles could work. It drew on the conceptual spatial strategy for Oxford in Oxford Futures.² There are now moves by the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and others to explore some of the conclusions, in spite of the general political antipathy between the various stakeholders. I will also refer to Cambridge. Like the 2015 seminar held by the Historic Towns Forum,³ from which this paper is drawn, the current discussion is polemic rather than academic, and

reflects on the institutional context, the loss of regional strategy and the current abrogation of government responsibility, which seems to have resulted in stasis if not paralysis – especially on topics such as housing or green belt;

- Consider the general doom and gloom constrained by the myths we seem to live and a future, which reflects Local Plan periods, but not a 30-50 year perspective. Only by looking past the exigencies of Local Plan politics and the reactive nature of its formulation, can the real needs for infrastructure and direction of growth be considered;
- Consider ways forward, particularly for historic cities like Oxford to respond to technical and cultural changes in the twenty-first century. Are there things that can be learnt from elsewhere?

Institutional mechanisms

Institutional mechanisms are critical to any strategy. Investors look for certainty in a city's growth strategy – a certainty that demonstrates a long term vision and reflects an 'open system' or expandability that, for instance, Milton Keynes' grid provides.

The devolution of power has led to fragmentation. There seems to be a climate of risk aversion with no-one taking responsibility, or if they want to take responsibility, the centrality of the

UK government does not quite allow it, in spite of Localism. The government talks about facilitating and enabling, but resourcing is not adequate. The result would appear to be:

- The lack of any strategic planning to work alongside NPPF at regional and sub-regional levels;
- A dysfunctional system which does not connect the neighbourhood and the region together;
- Little in the way of joined-up thinking from local to central government and a plethora of organisations ploughing their own furrows.

Recessionary cuts and demands to expedite decision-making on planning applications have exacerbated Councils' difficulties to focus on future spatial strategies.

Many years ago a City Engineer would look at infrastructure like road, rail, and water and lay down the structure and direction of growth for the city. Since then Urban Development Corporations have shown what they can do (from New Towns to Olympic Villages), and regional administrations have managed to set broad strategies for their areas. All were concerned with how and where a city would grow.

Since then the rise of what Janet Morphet terms 'institutional indeterminacy',⁴ the existence of a number of organisations that all seem to have similar objectives, has

taken place. Whatever the philosophical reason for such fragmentation, LEPs, Combined Authorities, City Deals, Economic Prosperity Boards and Growth Boards, let alone Local and County Authorities, all end up dealing with bits of strategy - though not necessarily spatial strategy. Is it any wonder that it is so difficult to get agreement on strategic issues? The result:

- Uncertainty about the relationship between location of work and where people want to live;
- Uncertainty over energy, transport investment and levels of sustainability;
- Uncertainty caused by the mixed messages regarding accountability, the emasculation of local authorities and a sense of powerlessness of much of the population where there appears to be democratisation without resources to achieve aspirations;
- Uncertainty over the policy and nature of sustainable development, with the move away from carbon neutrality, energy resource and housing standards, and so forth;
- Uncertainty due to the rise of single issue organisations that are focused on their particular concerns without acknowledging or reflecting on a 'bigger picture.'

Myths and implications

In a recent book on human culture, Yuval Harari posits the concept of the cognitive revolution being the first step in human kind creating an understanding of our world and our position in it.⁵ The cognitive revolution enabled the telling of stories to explain why things are the way they are and thus create myths to ensure these ideas are embedded in our psyche. To do this requires cultural institutions and rules, and these have to be established. In the field of planning and urban design these myths still exist and are in frequent use. How many times have we seen plans of urban extensions that include words like 'Village Green' or 'Market Place' where neither really exists? Most of our housing today is built around the myths of village life, coloured by nostalgia for a non-existent past. Images of these myths are being used as design benchmarks against which new development is judged. The result is often poor quality sprawl, with the smallest houses with the most rooms in Europe, developed by a house-building industry controlled by 10 companies. In addition, many bureaucracies have institutionalised some of these concepts in publications such as the Essex Design Guide. These images continue to shape our built environment. In some cases developers try to replicate these myths, but are thwarted by bureaucratic regulations set up to ensure the continuity of the myth. There are also invisible boundaries created for political or economic reasons, but no lines in the ground that can be seen. Yet some of these concepts have become protected

and take on a pseudo sanctified status – immutable and inflexible like the green belt. Organisations set themselves up to jealously guard them. Oxford's green belt (one of the largest in the country) which is there to protect, among other things the setting of the city, is being considered by some to be one of the barriers to change. According to Clive Aslet:

Wales and Scotland look at their landmass as a whole and develop strategies. England, by contrast, has what ministers describe as a bottom-up approach – with the proviso that the bottom will be caned should it fail to deliver enough houses. Localism rules – but alas only in theory...⁶

So myths related to the green belt, institutional indeterminacy caused by the arrangement of Council boundaries, and the plethora of sub-regional organisations (and the impact of privatisation of much of our infrastructure should not be ruled out) have, in central Oxfordshire for instance, created a condition where there is:

- No real long-term vision for central Oxfordshire – what one might call the city region of historic Oxford;
- A lack of connectivity between the various elements that constrains this area as a potential powerhouse;
- A lack of socio-economic balance and a disparity between demand for appropriate housing and its supply. Oxford is the least affordable city in the country;

- Corporate changes in house-builders: in 2007 Taylor Woodrow and Wimpey between them produced 21,000 units and in 2014 Taylor Wimpey 10,000;
- 1,400 Council completions over the whole of England in 2014-2015. Brandon Lewis MP suggests this is a 23 year high.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why some investors might perceive the status of Oxford University to be diminishing as a premier academic and knowledge global brand.

Within this 'institutional indeterminacy' we see that there are some historic cities that have been able to respond to the challenges of pressure of growth. If Cambridge can do it, why not Oxford? Is there a general model or at least a common approach that could help? Nearly all historic cities are experiencing development pressure to a greater or lesser extent. Each city has its own attributes and constraints, character, and economic base. Different social and economic development has taken place; segregated neighbourhoods have sprung up. One can see this clearly in Oxford if comparing the development of North Oxford and that, say of Jericho, Cowley or Blackbird Leys. Houses for the less well-off were still located in the central areas. These are now very expensive. New industry and employment with its attendant housing often grew at the edges, and one can see that in Oxford as the city subsumed Headington and Iffley, among other places. New economic development

brought new opportunities and challenges. Many cities promoted policies of zoning, keeping industry together in large blocks at the edge of town, away from housing that accommodated their workers rather than scattered as previously. Policies to encourage polycentricity became popular with the change in the type of industry and with greater compatibility between clean employment and housing. This model has become more attractive. The increasing recognition of synergy as an economic benefit – and of a more relaxed approach to working from home – has led to creative industries 'colonising' and embedding themselves in local neighbourhoods. One can see this in places like 'Silicon Roundabout' in London or Palo Alto in California. They rely on adjacent centres of excellence (learning or making) and good connectivity – not just through the web but face to face.

For many historic cities this presents difficulties. It may be back to the future. New forms of employment that can be accommodated flexibly within housing areas may need to be considered. A more flexible approach to housing may also need to be considered. For instance there are major R&D centres not far from Oxford but with little housing nearby. The main connections are by car. The current proposal for the Northern Gateway in Oxford has the potential to mix academia, research, synergetic businesses and associated housing for those who come from around the world to work in hi-tech employment. Historic cities like Boston have recognised that if you want to have the best brains, and attract investment, you

also need to consider appropriate housing – best designs, best locations, best social environment as well as affordability. Local authorities and significant landowners need to invest in their city, its public realm, its transport – all elements that attract global investment, and create a new legacy.

Governments of historic cities in Europe have dealt with their renewal to attract this investment. In Montpellier, Grenoble, Leiden, and Nîmes, for example, civic leadership, civic partnerships accessible funding, and an understanding of the importance of placing the city in a national, European and even global context, has led to a re-assessment of a city's public face and its 'presence' in an economic environment where footloose companies are as interested in environmental and cultural values as they are in productivity and profit. This also requires a depth in new employment opportunities. So Montpellier, Nimes, Avignon, and Ales have a linked regional polycentric academic, and R&D networks. Airports and city centres are linked. Collaboration is the key. Here, increasingly, the need is for Councils to work together for the wider good; infrastructure and transport companies to work with other stakeholders not just for their shareholders; CPRE to work with a city to resolve its growth appropriately, not to deny it; volume builders to cater for their users and not their shareholders to create harmony and beauty; County Highways to invest in appropriate infrastructure; Government to reinforce the institutional structures and, if appropriate, funds to make such an

integrated approach possible.

In the UK's fragmented institutional environment, where we have moved from an integrated view of the future that reflects the interdependencies that make up our historic cities, to a greater focus on satisfying the concerns of single issue groups, we find that to safeguard the interests of all – nothing much happens.

Not all is doom and gloom - The Local Enterprise Partnership

Local authorities, and other organisations, are facing these challenges in different ways; in central Oxfordshire the so-called 'arc of opportunity' might presage a bright future ahead. The LEP comprises local authorities, local businesses and has links to Central Government. Although its role is to promote local growth plans it has no strategic planning role. That still depends on the duty to collaborate between the various Councils and the LEP (as outlined in the NPPF). This 'horizontal integration' has led to City Deals, part funded by Government. It has yet to lead to active leadership – but may eventually get there. Oxford's LEP's vision is that in the next 15 years, Oxfordshire will be recognised as a 'vibrant, sustainable, inclusive world-leading economy, driven by innovation, enterprise and research excellence.'¹⁷ To achieve this investment, the City Deal includes:

- Major investment in a network of new innovation, biotech/biomedical facilities and incubation centres to weld the

- Centres of excellence into a 'knowledge spine'. This includes 7,500 homes, and ultimately 100,000 to support these and other growth hubs in the County. This would lever in investment to help fund housing, infrastructure, and help create 18,600 new jobs, rising to 85,000 in 15 years.
- The 15 year Strategic Plan also includes significant road and rail improvements, estimated at £1.3 billion.

What is interesting is that although the thrust is growth-positive, issues such as reviewing green belt boundaries are only pointed to as a consideration, in spite of the fact that without such a review some of the proposed growth will be constrained, if not impossible, and much of Oxford's housing demand unmet. This sequence of events and players is typical of the process with which such historic towns find themselves involved. It relies heavily on collaboration between local Councils. In Oxfordshire this is a challenge. The other challenge is that the boundaries of the city are very tightly drawn and this has meant Oxford City is basically at capacity. It has very little space within its lines to provide anything like the 28,000 homes required over the next 15 years. It relies on other Councils to collaborate. This is not an unusual situation. The challenge is the same for Cambridge. However, Cambridge has managed to come to an accommodation with its adjacent Councils, the university and its colleges, and has thus overcome the boundary and green belt constraints.

Oxford Futures

In tandem with the publication of the LEP's Oxfordshire economic strategy, the Oxford Civic Society (OCS) published Oxford Futures,⁸ which looked at the necessity for smart growth to ensure economic, social and environmental well-being. The OCS needs to be congratulated for being so pro-active, and putting forward some thoughts on spatial plans and strategic principles for the future of Oxford's city region. It takes a pragmatic stance:

- It deliberately demotes cognitive myths and the boundaries that have been created and posits a new, integrated approach to resolving the challenges in this region. This sub-region has the potential to become one of the key drivers of local, regional and even national economies in a twenty-first century based on its knowledge/science based industries. The constraints on the city to grow due to boundaries, flood plain and green belt have led to a shortage of housing related to employment areas for highly qualified employees and alone key workers;
- Capacity problems of major routes due to large scale commuting have resulted in congestion and pollution and led to dysfunctional roles and relationships between the city and its satellite towns;
- This has been exacerbated by limited collaboration, few common Council agendas, and only recently a clearer

view of what the universities and colleges want.

Oxford Futures promotes a possible strategy for growth that recognises a N-S development and amenity spine, and integrated mixed-use growth along enhanced links in 'big bites' to reduce radically the pressure on some of the sensitive villages around. It explores different spatial scenarios, suggesting the advantages of a polycentric linear arrangement of settlements with enhanced connectivity and new rapid transit linking major employment centres with existing residential areas, a more active use of the flood plain, and a commensurate adjustment to the green belt.

Oxford Futures had a far-sighted strategic and spatial approach to ensure sustainable development over time. It recognised that 'Brand Oxford' is critical to the marketing of this area. Oxford University has significant assets, and recently has been loaned £200 million by the European Investment Bank (the largest loan it has ever issued to a University) to invest in teaching and research facilities. But where does the university house those coming to work in these facilities? Maybe the new devolution of business rates will enable Councils actively to invest in local infrastructural improvements.

For those historic towns that have a solid base of high tech and science-based industries, the economic potential and associated housing demand is very important. Matching them is difficult. Matching them with high quality is harder

and historic cities need to ensure that the mechanisms are in place to procure and review plans to ensure excellence. After all it would seem that the historic environment that is a great attractor.

Exemplar historic cities

It is important to learn from other historic cities. In the UK the focus has been on the success of South Cambridge, which, together with other Councils and the University, looked at the need for housing, R&D and high quality employment and also recognised the need to adjust the green belt, provide new transport infrastructure and an integrated approach to development. The Cambridge Quality Charter provided a design benchmark.⁹ Cambridge University and its colleges have also developed and implemented a consistent and co-ordinated strategy focused on the long-term success of the University, rather than just thinking about short term financial gain. The result is the creation of a vision, a business plan, and launching a bond issue to raise a £350M development fund. In Cambridge the driver was the University. It provided leadership, influenced planning and established mechanisms to collaborate with other parties. The collective commitment over time by the local authorities has also been crucial. Oxford has now to walk a similar route.

It is useful for historic towns and cities in the UK to look at what has been achieved in similar cities in Europe. The Dutch model is to build neighbourhoods located on good public transport routes. Local

authorities there often lead the strategic planning process and help assemble sites. In Central Oxfordshire there are some brave experiments such as Bicester's Eco-town and its Graven Hill self-build scheme, but these are not yet linked to major employment areas. Transport is key and any new investment, whether new stations, services or modes needs to be geared toward reducing car usage. This is particularly clear in Freiburg - another historic knowledge city - which has taken 25 years to mature into one of Europe's exemplars of sustainable cities. Based on the extension of an existing tramline, housing has been built by a combination of development companies, co-operatives and individuals through self-build/self-managed development. It has achieved this by taking the lead, providing builders with serviced sites, through a masterplan and design codes - a process that Cherwell District Council is following at Graven Hill.

These exemplars were based on five key principles:

- Develop in the right place and reduce car use, bringing housing and employment closer together - in the case of Oxford this might be along the main rail/road corridors;
- Create balanced and healthier communities - addressing not just affordable needs but those of new industries and R&D;
- Build distinctive places - one only has to look at how Barton Park is emerging or Graven Hill;
- Minimise environmental impact - ensuring higher densities, greener buildings, and garden suburbs.

The Public Sector can lead the way. Reading has put forward a long-term 2050 Vision geared to smart and sustainable growth. Here the stress is on leadership and how to make a visionary city. Historic cities are not always very good at articulating ambitions to be a learning city, a 'green city', or a connected city and so on, or then setting out policies and actions to underpin these goals, with a spatial masterplan to achieve them. Lack of vision and spatial strategy, perhaps because of political boundaries, lack of leadership or partnership with key stakeholders and landowners has an impact on a city and its surrounds.

Where does this leave the green belt in Oxford? One reason for the green belt was to avoid agglomeration and to prevent sprawl. What we have seen is that sprawl has just relocated itself to the outskirts of the green belt. We have also seen the rise of anxiety of local residents about the quality of development adjacent to their villages or as an extension to their town. Too little in the way of good design quality permeates the volume builders' products, and this has reinforced the fears of supporters of the green belt. We might need to separate the issue of whether the green belt flexes to respond to development pressure, or whether it should require design excellence to build in the green belt. In other words it becomes an Area of Outstanding Architectural Beauty. Until a more positive role can

be achieved for the green belt we will continue to see congestion and pollution on the poor road network that connect Oxford with its residential hinterland.

The Civic Trust recently put forward its view of the lessons learned from the commuting maps of central Oxfordshire:

When green belts were first introduced just one in seven households had access to a car; today it is 80%. By constraining housing growth immediately around Oxford and Cambridge in particular, green belts explain the large travel-to-work areas for these cities, as thousands of commuters drive across each city's green belt to get to work. This somewhat defeats the original rationale: green belts simply displace, rather than prevent sprawl.¹⁰

Could it be time then to rethink the role and the efficacy of the green belt?

A way forward - conclusion

Many cities have used their heritage assets as part of their economic strategy. Some of these assets are part of their narrative and myth. One could consider the green belt as part of that narrative and as a 'place' not a barrier; something that has a positive function, part of the interface between city and countryside. There is even talk about it in terms of 'place-making,' though 'place-making' has traditionally focused on 'urban space.' As Susan Silberberg in her article 'The Common Thread' suggests, it may be time

that 'making' got a look in.¹¹ Giving the green belt a role, 'making' it into a 'place' could be a bridge between heritage and future identity.

In his essay 'Razed to Life,' the philosopher Julian Baggini points out that for a strong future a historic city has to have a healthy sense of identity. Oxford presents an ambiguous face. Maybe the issue here is:

to strike the right balance between acceptance of change, whilst not having so much of it that the narrative and myth becomes broken, as it has in much of the ad-hoc expansion plans of historic cities in this country. This is what should be informing decisions about what we preserve and what we should let go. We neither want to pickle our inheritance nor cast it carelessly away. Either way we kill it.¹²

Perhaps there is a need to look at where the balance in this area lies. If one looks at the green belt without prejudice one might think not about its immutability, but the creation of an equitable and positive legacy for the future.

The team that won the Wolfson Economic Prize described a plan to create an imaginary Garden City called Uxcester, with the view to use Oxford to illustrate a series of broad principles. The view of the authors is that it is better to graft development onto the strong root-stock of an existing city, and to add new 'garden suburbs,' each comprising 15 - 20,000 dwellings, housing up to some 50,000 people within 10km of the city centre and

then to establish appropriate mechanisms to redirect the rise in the value of development land into the provision of infrastructure and development of quality homes – as in Europe.

Without going into the details of the Uxcester proposals, opportunities are present to answer some of this historic city's challenges. They build on the outcomes of the Oxford Futures exercise and promote the concept of what David Rudlin has called taking a 'confident bite' out of the green belt.

The setting of Oxford, mostly formed by the flood plain, would not be compromised. Poor quality or constrained land could be used, so too, if necessary, could land in the green belt. Better and rapid public transport would ease commuting. The 'Knowledge Spine' would be reinforced. The green belt would flex and new country parks and other positive functions for the green belt would be created. New homes would be built where there are sufficient primary and secondary schools, hospitals, workplaces and retail areas to help rebalance the city and answer its housing needs. Oxford itself becomes a Garden City. That is the vision, but it requires continuity and leadership.

Growth per se is not a bad thing. It can provide jobs for existing residents; it can provide funds for better connectivity – both virtual and real. It can provide a healthy environment, social facilities and levels of sustainability with a higher quality of life. Historic cities will lose those talented people who would otherwise

contribute to the city's future. If Oxford is the powerhouse of this region, then this should be recognised. If the population of Oxford and its satellites is some 400,000, there is a critical mass to provide opportunities. In a global economy, the future of this area as a 'polycentre' for knowledge will rely on industries holding on to staff and extending the markets for its services. This is where smarter growth needs to be considered, to enable Oxford to match its European and American rivals and set new standards for appropriate development in the UK. How could it do this?

1. *Establish appropriate mechanisms* - a mechanism to create and articulate a long-term vision and strategy. In the past Urban Development Corporations, LEPs, Enterprise Zones and joint venture partnerships or similar have been considered. Following Uxcester principles, another type of vehicle might be the answer. Whatever it is, it needs to have the confidence of major landowners, communities and other partners with whom it will engage and collaborate, be vested with appropriate powers such as acquiring land, masterplanning and planning, and have a procurement process to ensure high quality design and environment. None of this is new but in some locations – such as Oxford – such a vehicle may be suitable and could be an evolution of the LEP.

2. *Create a long-term vision*. A vision linked to wider economic, social

and environmental goals for the area is necessary to identify where development should be located based on existing infrastructure availability - not the rather reactive situation we have today.

3. Link land use and transport planning.

Historic cities need to address current congestion and capacity issues and significantly re-focus movement towards pedestrian, cycling and public transport.

4. Expand the city in the right direction

- in larger 'bites' and not in ad-hoc estates - so that wider sustainable aspects are taken into account, even if that means flexing the green belt.

5. Rethink the relationship between

where people work and where they live, and the appropriate mix of housing facilities and work.

6. Create a spatial masterplan.

Most sustainable developments use rapid public transport as a spine. To this can be added walkability, healthy living, and compactness. The spatial masterplan will show how and where development is appropriate, and the costs of improvement in connectivity and economic and social well-being, commensurate with those locations.

7. Delivery. How the developments will

be financed (land, transport, facilities etc.) whether it be public, private or partnership investment and / or capturing the increase in value.

There are enormous challenges to our historic cities. In a global economy, the future of knowledge cities - and particularly historic knowledge cities like Cambridge, Oxford or York - is of more than local importance. The contention is that it is time to look at the future. What does the historic city want to be in 25 or 50 years? How can that be achieved? Do the constructs that have been created, whether it be political boundaries, designated boundaries such as green belt, or economic boundaries (between rich and poor) need to change to achieve that vision? The situation cannot go on as it is through fragmented and haphazard reactions, and single issue fixations. If it does, the current state of stasis, and the increasing imbalance in our society, will continue.

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Jon Rowland Urban Design is a small practice set up in 1996. The practice carries out a wide range of urban design projects. We work with a network of similar practices to promote a cross-professional attitude to urban development and regeneration.

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