



Localism - a new dawn for the Empire of the SUN (Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood)?

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Tony Benn's, possibly apocryphal, observation that *'England is the last colony of the British Empire'* captures a widely held sense that public life is dominated by distant Whitehall bureaucracies and globalised City corporations. Urbanists express similar sentiments when we lament the steady homogenisation of built environments into 'blandardised' edge-cities, clone towns and commuter villages.

New Labour's bold Devolution of power reached the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in rude health, but was orphaned in the English regions, unloved and ultimately immolated in the Coalition's 'bonfire of the quangos'. Councils were generously funded, but with tight strings attached, supplicant to London for more than 80 per cent of budgets.

Our local government grows steadily more remote compared to continental settlements – English districts house 127,000 souls on average, compared to German Gemeindenhassa of 11,000, and French Communes of just 1,500.

'Localism' was an idea toyed with in Labour's third term, notably by David

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Working with Communities

URBED in Manchester grew out of the tenants movement in Hulme and in particular the Homes for Change Housing Coop. The techniques we developed then to involve local people in the planning of their area remain central to our work today.

For more information on our work with local communities please click [here](#).

Alternatively please click on one of the images below.



homes by design



**URBED's Routemaster
Bus**

Miliband when Environment Secretary. He mused on 'double devolution' - cascading powers to councils and neighbourhoods. Local Area Agreements were the invisible outcome, and Mr Miliband moved on.

Six months into the Coalition's life, there is much more excitement. Eric Pickles invokes the high Victorian spirit of Joseph Chamberlain's municipal socialism in his eulogy to England's great city states ([A Vision for Cities](#)). Unimpressed, the Local Government Association call aspects of the [Localism Bill](#) 'dangerous and unconstitutional'. Planners wonder how commitments to neighbourhood structures will be resourced in an era of savage cuts. Developers and consultants see a NIMBY's charter, and architects fear further entrenchment of stylistic conservatism. Radical observers say the Bill is neutered without a third party right of appeal.

The government is unmoved. None of these interest groups are the intended beneficiaries of the Bill. The message of Localism is meant to reach over the heads of lobbyists and professional associations, to the parishes, residents groups and amenity societies frustrated by their perceived disenfranchisement from planning outcomes. The rhetoric privileges their perspective, but also challenges them to contribute time and money of their own.

It will be fascinating to see who steps forward.

Regardless of whether you see these groups as a vocal minority or champions of the silent masses, they make up the politically active population who engage in debate, direct action and exert influence on opinion, especially on planning and development decisions.

If we as professionals are proud of what we are proposing there should be no fear of engaging the active public in our design details. Very few people are actively out to wreck investment in their area - most simply want to have their say, make constructive comment and allay fears of done deals or 'thin end of the wedge' conspiracy theories.

There is understandable cynicism that Localism is a naked attempt to devolve blame for cuts. In cities like Liverpool, where I live, the long overdue shock therapy for local democracy seems secondary while the axe hangs over 10,000 public sector jobs. However, residents fighting target-driven Pathfinder clearances have already been given hope by Housing Minister Grant Shapps' threat to force sale of land banks acquired under CPO powers, and his bonus payments for bringing empty homes back into use.

For sure, uncertainty is an enemy of investment, and there are bound to be many development decisions deferred while the scenery shifts. A cultural revolution towards change shaped by consent rather than forced through conflict will take time. But this is a prize that should appeal across party loyalties - and may open opportunities for smaller provincial practices offering innovative interpretations of local design vernaculars, and new environmental technologies.

It's pushing Tony Benn's analogy to observe that the old imperial territories decolonised by Westminster's withdrawal have found wildly different fates - from Singapore to Sudan, Delhi to Dhaka. But the Welsh and Scottish civic revival, and the semi-success of England's urban renaissance, offer tentative hope for rediscovery of popular energy for reviving diversity across town and country, where historic civic destinies and lively entrepreneurial spirits have for too long



URBED's Thought Bubble



Design for Change

been suffocated by iron regulatory whim and cold financial appraisal.

New approaches to consultation

Ways of engaging local groups can go beyond a few boards in back room – URBED’s Routemaster bus allows ‘live planning’ to reach out into the heart of areas under discussion, moving around to meet different groups at times that suit them.

In Darlaston, Walsall, we spent a Saturday outside the town centre ASDA, and were then invited to the new Mosque, which turned out to be holding their open day the same afternoon.

The spacious but slightly more static inflatable ‘Thought Bubble’ (aka the ‘slug’) makes for a novel take on the classic marquee. It made quite a sight on Oldham evenings.

What does this mean for different ‘actors’

For communities:

- Short term implications for forwarding pet projects/ blocking pet hates; advice on engagement structures; organisational capacity; financing ‘community right to buy’ etc.
- Longer term impact on quality and control of local environments; raised expectations and vision; lack of ‘3rd party right of appeal’ will disappoint; checks and balances on elected mayors may be needed (they will obtain HCA’s far-reaching CPO powers).
- Opportunities to combine with existing rights and powers e.g. Village Greens, PRODs - [Empty Homes Agency](#)

For councils:

- Engagement structures, resource implications, impacts on existing strategies/ deals, mediation of local and strategic aims, de-unionised labour force.
- [New Local Government Network pamphlet on local government trends.](#)

For developers and clients:

- Impact on risk, timescales, up-front resources for consultation, site allocations etc., lack of ‘3rd party right of appeal’ a relief.

For design teams:

- Potential for new income streams, impact on local ‘style’ preferences, steep learning curve re. technical considerations of neighbourhood planning.
- [DCLG Technical guidance.](#)

For registered providers (Housing Associations):

- Opportunities to lead ‘localism’ e.g. through area based low-carbon retrofits at Neighbourhood level as per the [URBED ‘Community Green Deal’ model](#)
- Increased role will bring calls for greater accountability e.g. extension of PROD and FOI powers to cover social landlords.
- [Land reclamation powers](#)

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