

urban scrawl

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// Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood



Houten, Netherlands

Smarter Growth for Smarter Communities

*For decades, Britain has lagged behind the Continent in the quality of infrastructure, and the building of new homes. In this article **Nicholas Falk** and **David Rudlin** bring together their experience of studying best practice and working on live projects to suggest some ways in which smarter growth could be achieved.*

URBED has for years been taking professionals from the UK to look and learn from examples of neighbourhood development in the Netherlands, Germany and Scandinavia. It is clear to us that in the UK we have no less talent than you would find in these countries. We even have developers who want to improve what we build. Yet very little of what we build approaches the quality of say the Western Harbour in Malmo or Vauban in Freiburg, despite advice we write in design guides and policies.

Why is the UK not building more homes?

The answer lies as much in UK systems of investment and regulation as it does in the workings planning system or the quality of our professions. Changing our delivery system for major sites, does not just affect the quality of new housing, it is fundamental to meeting housing needs, rising to the challenge of a sustainable future, and creating jobs. In the UK finance that should have gone into saving energy, water and waste, and reducing the cost of travel, has ended up inflating property prices. British residents make many more journeys by car than in Germany and Denmark, which are just as densely populated. Our new homes are smaller and more expensive to run and buy, and we have been building them much more slowly than in the Netherlands or Sweden. Meanwhile, young families have been priced out of the market.

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News



URBED reunited!

There have been two arms to URBED for the past eight years. These are to be reunited under one name and website and will now be known as URBED (Urbanism Environment and Design) with offices in Manchester and London. The Manchester office is run by David Rudlin and specialises in masterplanning, consultation, and sustainability. Nicholas Falk, heads the London team and focuses on economic regeneration and community empowerment. The separate websites have been reconciled and all past projects are available to view on the [Archive](#) portfolio page. This provides an archive of the work URBED has been involved in for over 30 years and can be easily filtered to meet your interests. In our [Current work](#) you will find a project blog for each project, so you can keep up to date and see how projects develop.

The country that built hundreds of thousands of miles of railway in the two decades from 1840 took as long to upgrade the West Coast Mainline and has a fraction of the high-speed trains and urban tramways to be found in Germany or France. Despite all our good ideas and policies, we have become very poor at implementation. Someone always objects, there is inevitably a need for a public enquiry that drags on for years, and often nothing is built at the end. New development and infrastructure are rarely joined up to mutual benefit. Resources are dissipated in studies that come to nothing, whether for a wind farm in Bedfordshire, a tidal barrage on the Severn or the Leeds Supertram. We have lost the lead we had after the last war in heavy engineering, house building, and development finance. The centre for financing renewable energy is now Frankfurt not London, and we are over-dependent on French and German companies to run our utilities.

So, how can we overcome these barriers to produce better development? To illuminate the challenge let us contrast two hypothetical urban extensions in the UK and on the continent. The UK site will typically be in the ownership of a private developer, probably a volume housebuilder. An option will have been secured from the landowner subject to planning. A long battle will have been fought to get the site allocated for housing. That achieved, the landowner will have won the lottery and can retire on the proceeds. Meanwhile the developer who has paid far too much for the land will seek to recoup the investment by minimizing costs and maximizing value, cutting back on affordable housing and any community benefits.

The mechanism by which investment in physical and social infrastructure, such as renewable energy, transport infrastructure or schools, translates into the value of new housing in the UK is, to say the least, imperfect. The planning application will cost hundreds of thousands of pounds to prepare most of which is spent on studies to show that the scheme will have a minimal impact and to justify why certain things cannot be done rather than say masterplanning (writing as masterplanners this is clearly regrettable). At the same time the local planning authority will assume that the developer is milking the system and will try and load the scheme with as many planning conditions and Section 106 obligations as possible (the long awaited Community Infrastructure Levy may address this to an extent). There will be another planning battle leaving both sides dissatisfied and leading to a scheme that is a botched compromise of concessions grudgingly given. After a few years of slow sales, the first phase will be finished, sitting forlorn, bereft of facilities. Then the market will dip below the level the developer needs to recoup the inflated price paid for the land, and development will stall, while companies and the banks that back them are recapitalized.

There is another version of the UK site scenario in which the land is offered by a public agency through the OJEU process. Developers will tender for the opportunity making many promises about the quality of the scheme and again overbidding in order to see off the opposition. There then follows a process of slightly bad tempered bargaining as the developer finds the scheme doesn't quite stack up and seeks to renegotiate the undertakings given. Thereafter it follows a similar course to that described above.

What can we learn from Europe?

So now let us turn to the continental site, the one that we will be visiting in years to come and writing up admiringly as best practice. This will tend to be in public ownership, perhaps through a joint venture partnership with private owners in which land is pooled. The local authority will have considered the options for the growth of the town and come to a view about which land is to be 'promoted' for



Love Your City

David produced this [presentation](#) in answer to a debate after being accused of being willing to sacrifice the future of the planet for the sake of his own prejudices about cities. The presentation has been developing for a number of years but in its current form was given at the Love Your City Conference at Sheffield School of Architecture on Valentines Day this year, then as a keynote at an academic conference in Paris entitled "Recherches pour une architecture de la ville durable" organised by CNRS and then again at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales in April.



SUN Network Final Report Launch

The final reports from the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods Network were launched at the RICS to a packed audience on Tuesday 21 February, and the recommendations are being well received. You can obtain both the full research report and the shorter Solutions paper, which is aimed at local authorities, by visiting the [SUNN's project blog](#). Further events are being planned, so watch this space.

development (not 'released' as it would be in the UK). They will have acquired the land at existing use value, plus compensation and will then have drawn up the masterplan themselves, possibly following a limited competition. The site may not have been advertised, as they prefer to deal with people they know and can trust. They, or the joint venture partnership will then use prudential borrowing to invest in infrastructure, often tapping into a municipal bank that specializes in this kind of project. Low cost long-term loans will be used to build a CHP plant and heat network, extend the tram system or build a new railway station, and over time build schools and other community facilities. This money will also be used to build the main roads and strategic open spaces defining a series of serviced sites that will then be sold to developers. These will be controlled by design guidance written into the sale/lease agreements, with a masterplan that makes it clear what densities, streets and uses are to go where. The cost/value of the infrastructural investment is mediated through the land value paid by the developer. Generally the public sector will make its investment back but it can choose to accept lower land values to prevent the scheme from stalling in weak markets. Indeed the developers, who may well be a housing association or building group, will typically pay a proportion of the expected sales value, so that their selection is based on the quality of what they propose, and not the size of their bid.

These are generalisations and there are, of course, many terrible schemes on the continent that are as botched as anything in the UK. The point however is that on our European tours we visit schemes developed through the continental process described above and lament why schemes developed via the UK process cannot achieve the same standards. This explains why we have fallen short of our aspirations, even in our best schemes built during the best of times.



Britain badly needs planned urban extensions and infill schemes that are developed in locations that have the necessary infrastructure, that are built much faster and in ways that create jobs. Even in growth spots identified under the previous government, implementation has been far too slow. Take for example the new town of Northstowe on an airfield North of Cambridge acquired by the HCA for around £100 million, which has stalled, despite the development of a Guided Busway, which has cost over £180 million. Even the Greenwich Peninsular, where a former gas works was decontaminated at huge public expense, and a station opened on the Jubilee Line, development has proceeded at a fifth of the pace of a similar site in Stockholm at Hammarby Sjostad.

What is required are not just exhortations to try harder or ever more restrictive



URBED Office Grows!

As well as recently welcoming Vincent, an urban design intern from France to the team, we are also growing many fruit and vegetables. We thought it would be good to try and grow stuff that is usually grown in a greenhouse. Especially as our office creates a greenhouse effect, with big windows and lots of light which all the veg seem to love. We have been successfully growing mushrooms which tasted delicious, tomatoes, aubergines, green peppers, chillies, and carrots. The herbs include; basil, rocket, thyme, chives, parsley, coriander, lemon coriander, rosemary and oregano. Yet to make an appearance is mint, sage and lovage. We will be posting lots of pictures showing progress of our office farm over the coming weeks, proving you can grow-your-own at home or at work!

codes but a redesign of the process for large schemes, learning from our mistakes but also achievements in some of the New Towns. There needs to be a partnership between municipal government and developers that can call upon long-term 'patient' finance to make quality development happen, for example by issuing bonds. Investment banks such as BNG in the Netherlands or the Caisse Des Depots et Consignations in France support local authorities in carrying out national policies, such as the ambitious French programme of 'eco-towns'. As yet there is no equivalent in Britain. The proposed Green Infrastructure Bank should be useful, but only if it can lever up its £2 billion of initial public capital, through financial 'cocktails' with other funding sources. Some housing associations have used the bond market to good effect to raise sums of £100 million, repayable after 15 or 20 years. But bonds can only work where the land is put in as equity, and sufficient development finance is available, for example through pension funds and insurance companies investing in housing for rent or the supply of infrastructure, as on the Continent.



Working in Partnership

Public-private partnerships for new communities have to take a twenty year perspective, way beyond any government. They need to sell 'oven-ready' serviced sites to house builders, not hang on waiting for values to rise. If Local Enterprise Partnerships were to identify the best strategic sites, communities could be reconnected with their common wealth, and generate quality jobs in the process. By joining up development and infrastructure, local authorities could secure 'smarter growth' that looks and works better, where possible mobilising under-used land such as car parks or redundant hospitals and other public buildings. By issuing bonds, possibly as a group, they could tap funds that are looking for a safe haven. By working with a portfolio of sites to spread the risks and cover the initial set-up costs, insurance companies and pension funds could diversify their investments, which would be good for savers.

URBED is fortunate in working for a number of developers seeking to address these issues. These include an urban extension at Barton in Oxford – where Oxford City Council has set up a limited partnership with Grosvenor Developments. We are also working in the Bradford Canal Road Corridor for a joint venture between Bradford Council and a developer/landowner, Urbo. In this partnership the land is pooled and put in at a nominal value, allowing the value that is created to be invested in the scheme. Models like this potentially put in place some of the factors for success described in this article. It shows that the barriers in the UK are not necessarily legislative or institutional and that if there is a political will, a way can be found.

Dr Nicholas Falk, BA MBA, FRSA Hon FRIBA is an economist, urbanist and strategic planner who founded URBED in 1976. David Rudlin, BA MTP is Director of URBED in Manchester, they are both directors of the URBED Trust and co-authored the book [Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood](#).

Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood Highlights



New Bolton Woods

We are working with URBO to develop a sustainable urban village in North Bradford. The project, a development partnership between regeneration company Urbo and Bradford Council, has been created to guide, manage and secure development in Bolton Woods over the coming years. We have begun consultation of the wider area and have set up a new [blog](#) to help people get in touch with their thoughts about the proposals.

SUNN
JOSEPH ROWNTRICE
Sustainable
Urban
Neighbourhoods
Network

1. Ancoats and New Islington, Manchester
2. Derwenthorpe, York
3. Dickens Heath Village, Solihull
4. Grand Union Village, Northolt
5. Graylingwell, Chichester
6. Ironstone, Lawley, Telford
7. Lightmoor, Telford
8. Newhall, Harlow
9. Orchard Park, Cambridge
10. Upton, Northampton
11. Walker Riverside, Newcastle
12. Yours South Lynn, Norfolk
13. Walker Riverside, Newcastle

Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood Network (SUNN)

The Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood Network (SUNN) brings together 13 new communities under development in growth and regeneration areas across England, to study what has or hasn't worked in each community. All share a concern to build healthier communities, safer streets, and living places, good design and greater choice of housing, with environmental features that minimise the development's ecological footprint.

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