

Nicholas Falk (second left) with a group of Dutch town planners



Profile of Nicholas Falk

How a Harkness Fellow stepped off the corporate ladder to become an inner city regeneration pioneer

Most Harkness Fellows on the original programme returned inspired and exhilarated by their two years in the US. But for a favoured few, it was much more than just being stimulated. They experienced a Damascene conversion. One of these is Nicholas Falk (1967-69), whose experiences in California have steered much of his life for the 45 years that followed.

Where once it looked as though he was heading for a top management job in the private sector – with his PPE degree from Oxford, a three-year management period with Ford Motor Companies, followed by three years with McKinsey management consultants – all being topped up with a MBA at the Stanford School of Business on a Harkness Fellowship. But while at Stanford he also signed up for a course run by the Free University of the West on urban regeneration. On visits to San Francisco he saw how community action – particularly reviving abandoned commercial buildings – could help transform inner cities. Down in the city's Fisherman's Wharf area, the Ghirardelli Square had just undergone just such a transformation. It had been abandoned by the Ghirardelli chocolate factory, but

rather than replacing the historic brick structures with apartment buildings, the new owners had converted them into an integrated restaurant and retail complex. It was the first major adaptive re-use project in the US opening in 1964. Nick returned to the UK with a MBA but also with a desire to see whether he could do something similar to what he had seen in San Francisco in London. With a Senior Research Fellowship in the Social Administration Department of the London School of Economics he picked on Rotherhithe in London's Docklands for a series of action research projects. He saw the potential of Brunel's derelict Engine House, which held the steam power pumps for building the Thames tunnel. Initially used by pedestrians, it was converted to rail becoming 'the oldest tunnel in the oldest underground of the world'. The steam pumps became redundant in 1913 with the introduction of electric versions. The Engine House was restored and now houses the Brunel Museum. The surrounding area has been landscaped. There were at that time only two development trusts in London: Coin Street and the 23 acres of land under Westway motorway. Nick formed the third in the 1970s, the Industrial Buildings Preservation Trust, which converted neighbouring

warehouses on the Rotherhithe site into craft workshops. These were not only renovated but featured in his PhD dissertation on using action research to achieve urban regeneration in 1982. Nick had also joined the Fabian Society on his return from the US and produced a pamphlet on inner city redevelopment in 1975 drawing on his action research. It was read by David Sainsbury who gave him a three year grant from his Gatsby Foundation. With this fund he set up URBED (Urban and Economic Development) in 1976 to research and offer practical solutions to urban regeneration and local economic development.

An urban renewal enterprise is launched

Its first office was in Covent Garden in one of many redundant warehouses. URBED's first government contract was into the feasibility of reusing redundant buildings as a means of promoting sustainable development and saving energy. In the late 1980s Nick was a key player in the renovation of another abandoned London waterway complex: Merton Abbey Mills. Sitting on the river Wandle between Tooting and Morden it has been turned into a charming arts and craft village in an eighteenth century setting. *Contd>*

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At one time there were 100 mills along the river. The recreated village was once the main silk printing works of Liberties, the famous Regent Street store, that was shut in 1970 and not reopened until 1989. Just up the river was William Morris's works. The Merton Abbey wheel house has been fully restored and is now a pottery. A small theatre now occupies the old Colour House. And an open air mini market along with six cafes offering different national cuisine brings in the crowds. Nick has not just been engaged in practical work. He continues to carry out research, writing and advocacy including reports for governments, think tanks and inhouse publications. In the last six months he has written a 6000-word essay on how older people can add value to lifelong neighbourhoods for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network. He has just been shortlisted with colleague David Rudkin for the Wolfson 2014 Economics Prize for proposals for Uxcester Garden City, based on extending historic cities like York and Oxford through 'Garden City' principles using infrastructure bonds. He has also just written a report that draws on European experience in building sustainable urban neighbourhoods for the Smith Institute ('Funding Housing and Local Growth: how a British Investment Bank could help').

A new urban renewal manifesto

And then there is his contributions to Peter Hall's latest book just published, 'Good Cities, Better Lives – how Europe discovered the lost art of Urbanism'. The book draws on four decades of conversations between them and study tours each separately have organised for British town planners to places on the continent that have become celebrated as examples of best practice. The first five chapters are a devastating critique of the



current state of urban development in the UK. They expose the excessive Whitehall restrictions on towns and cities suggesting the UK has become "the most centralised bureaucratic state in the western world". They note how demonstrably worse the UK is to comparable European countries in developing the right quantity and quality of housing. Other fronts where reform is needed included land supply, land-use planning, the financing of infrastructure, and the design and management of new settlements. A further five chapters looked at how Germany's cities have generated growth; the Netherlands created sustainable suburbs; the French used investment in public transport to help regenerate its cities; and Scandinavia's schemes for conserving natural resources and the environment.

At the age of 70 Nick still runs URBED'S London office, the main office being in Manchester specialising in design, community engagement and sustainability. His recent work includes both a policy report on the state of town centres for the North and West London Alliances and a study for English Heritage involving transferring heritage assets to community groups. Other advisory roles have included the joint venture between Oxford City Council and the Grosvenor Estates for a new community development of 850 homes at Barton Park, just south of Headington. He is a visiting Professor at the School of the Built Environment at the University of the West of England; an Academician of the Academy of Urbanism; and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects. But perhaps most fitting of all he still keeps a link with the country which inspired him to become an urbanist. He runs an annual course for masters students in sustainable architecture at New York University in London. We met in the cafe of the Building Centre just off Tottenham Road, where URBED has its London base. There is a massive model of London on the ground floor, with side exhibits of the best and the worst developments in the city. He remains the most affable of people, still cherishing conversation, new ideas and debate. He has clearly enjoyed every moment of his 38 years in urban regeneration, even though the monetary rewards have been much lower than his first two jobs after leaving Oxford and his Stanford MBA would have led to. He is still wondering how to celebrate URBED's 40th anniversary in 2016 and still finds it amazing he has spent four decades pursuing the art of urbanism. He has no regrets.