

# Model maker turned placemaker



As founder of urban design specialists URBED, Nicholas Falk knows all about sustainable placemaking, and they are ideas he's determined to share. ROGER HUNT meets the man with a UK urban masterplan on his mind

Nicholas Falk is an urbanist but he spent his formative years engrossed in steam railways and today a huge model layout occupies the cellar of his home in Stroud, Gloucestershire. This is perhaps why he understands so well the need for infrastructure to knit communities together and why he sees heritage as an asset. In 1987, he far-sightedly wrote an article on London's Kings Cross, drawing attention to the potential of the 'railway lands' and the then alien idea that its heritage could serve as the heart of the area's regeneration.

During his career Falk seems often to have been ahead of the game and the broad sweep of his experience undoubtedly contributed to the fact that URBED, the practice he founded in 1976, recently won the

prestigious Wolfson Economics Prize from a field of 279 entries. The challenge – "How would you deliver a new garden city which is visionary, economically viable, and popular?" – was almost tailor-made to URBED's vision of sustainable urban design.

Alongside his love for trains, Falk has been "passionate about creating a better society" since his days at Oxford, where he achieved a 2.1 in philosophy, politics and economics – he admits he might have done better but "I enjoyed myself".

From Oxford he joined the Ford Motor Company because he "really wanted to understand

how a successful business operated". Next came Stanford Graduate School of Business to gain an MBA and "learn from the Americans how you run a successful organisation". This period sparked Falk's interest in cities. "It was a realisation that American cities were becoming ever more unfair because of the racial divides, the ghettos and so on, but also I was inspired by seeing the reuse of old buildings in San Francisco."

After a spell at management consultants McKinsey came a PhD at the London School of Economics and involvement with a project converting old

warehouses into workshops for small businesses; this eventually resulted in a thesis on the planning and development of London's docklands.

Fortuitously he also wrote a Fabian pamphlet on the inner city. This was read by David Sainsbury (later the chairman of the supermarket chain) who invited Falk to lunch. The pair "hit it off" and in 1976 Sainsbury provided the funding to found URBED – then an acronym for Urban and Economic Development and now for Urbanism Environment and Design – to offer practical solutions to ▶



**THIS PIC:** Hammarby Sjöstad, an urban extension of Stockholm, Sweden – even at higher densities the treatment of open space and urban landscape can provide a good quality of life for families. Photo credit: Beyond Eco-towns

**LEFT:** Nicholas Falk. Photo credit: Roger Hunt



*“we’ve always been interested in continental approaches. The interesting thing about the places they create is not the architecture of the individual buildings, which is often prosaic, but the fact that the place as a whole is an attractive place to be.”*

urban regeneration and local economic development.

The first study URBED undertook was on the reuse of old buildings in Hackney and Islington for the then Department of the Environment. Projects involving area regeneration followed. One was for the Jewellery Quarter in Birmingham, another an area of historic warehouses known as Little Germany in Bradford. “It was with Bradford that we took on David Rudlin, a young lad from Manchester who really brought

some design expertise into URBED,” explains Falk.

Rudlin, a planner by training, had started his career with Manchester City Council and had responsibility for the early stages of the redevelopment of Hulme. He was also secretary of the Homes for Change housing cooperative, commissioning one of the flagship buildings of the Hulme redevelopment. Subsequently, Rudlin went on to produce both the Hulme and Manchester design guides, drawing up principles for how to create places that are sustainable.

The first phase of the Homes for Change scheme was completed in 1996 and the second in 2000. “If you look at this today, it’s quite different from the average housing scheme; it’s mixed use and looks more like something from the Continent. Indeed, we’ve always been interested in continental approaches. The interesting thing about the places they create is not the architecture of the individual buildings, which is

often prosaic, but the fact that the place as a whole is an attractive place to be.”

URBED’s first major private sector masterplan was the New England quarter in the heart of Brighton. Plans in the late 1990s to build a Sainsbury’s superstore were refused following a campaign by local community groups. One of the groups argued that the site should be developed as a sustainable urban neighbourhood as advocated by URBED. As a result, the developer asked URBED to masterplan the site, which now includes One Brighton, the scheme by Crest Nicholson BioRegional Quintain of 172 apartments along with office and community space. The sustainability statement URBED prepared explored a range of measures designed to address the environmental sustainability of the scheme, including energy, waste management, transport and water use.

The experiences in Brighton and Hulme informed the book Falk and Rudlin wrote ►

ABOVE: One Brighton  
ABOVE RIGHT: One Brighton allotments.  
Photo credit: Crest Nicholson BioRegional Quintain

together: Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood, Building the 21st Century Home. This describes the way that environmental and demographic change, economic pressures and the needs of community could change urban areas forever, just as the garden city movement did a century ago.

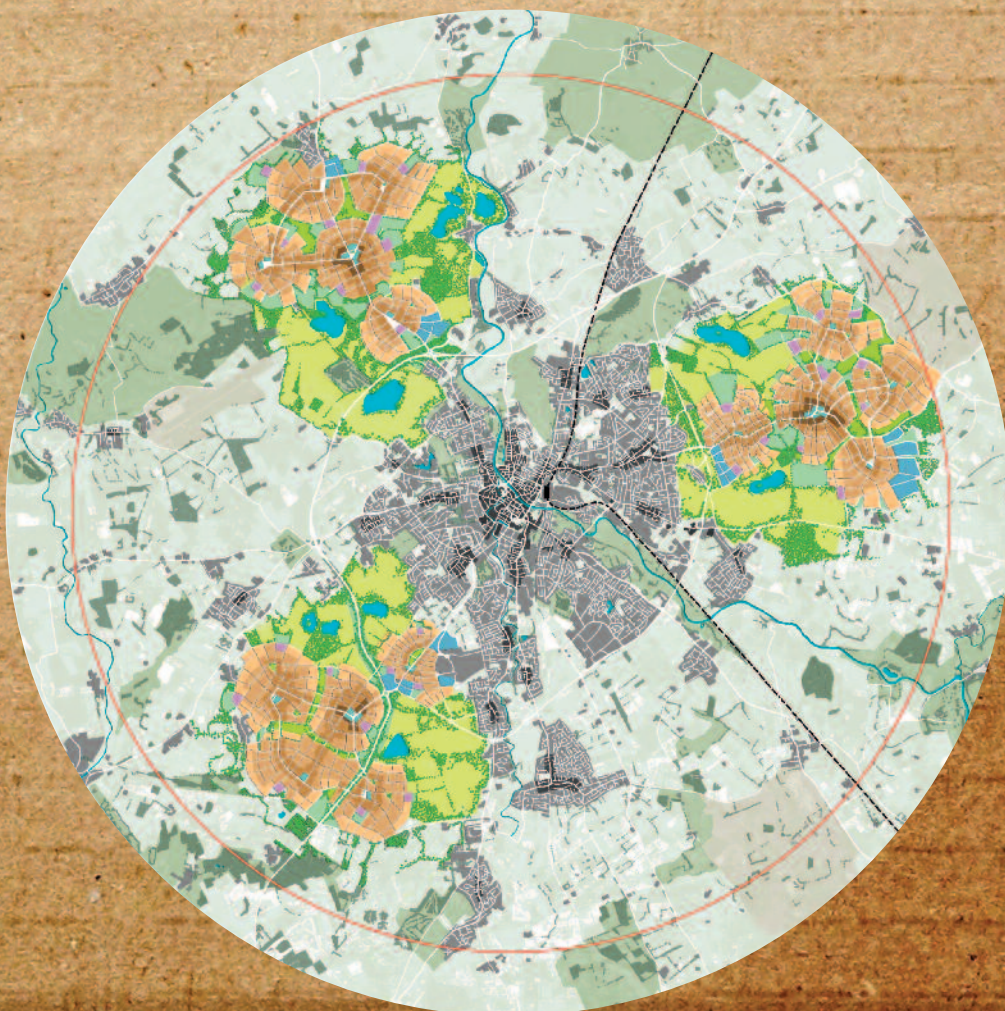
Much of URBED's work has been for government and local authorities, but a growing amount is for innovative developers. In conjunction with PRP and Design for Homes, Falk helped write *Beyond Eco-towns: Applying the Lessons from Europe* – a review of exemplary practice in developing sustainable urban extensions in four European countries. "We discovered that they all had a lot in common, even though the countries were very different. Essentially they were bolted onto existing places where people wanted to live, they didn't try to do as we were trying to do in the UK with proposed eco-towns and build something out of nothing."

Falk sees a very British problem being the green belts that

surround the cities, which "are very tight", and points to the "green fingers" strategy adopted in Copenhagen as making a lot more sense because it offers an interrelationship between town and country.

In terms of economy, building homes, infrastructure and environmental sustainability, Falk singles out Freiburg, in Germany – with its two urban extensions, Vauban and Rieselfeld – as one city that has done it all. "An important aspect of any new community is being future-proofed. In Freiburg, land is significantly cheaper so there's more money to invest in infrastructure up front. The houses are also cheaper because they are simple and cheap to build – often through co-operatives – but the extra money is invested back into making them more sustainable."

The test of good sustainable urban design is whether you have created somewhere that will endure and be valued in 30-50 years time, believes Falk. "It has to be a walkable and cycle-



**TOP:** Vauban and Rieselfeld are districts on the edge of Freiburg, Germany, and the existing tram system had only to be extended to bring good 'connectivity' to the new development. Photo credit: *Beyond Eco-towns*

**ABOVE:** Flood risk due to climate change – all habitable rooms in HafenCity in Hamburg, Germany, have been elevated to 7.5m above sea level. Photo credit: *Beyond Eco-towns*

**LEFT:** Uxbridge overall plan from URBED's winning Wolfson Economics Prize submission

friendly place and therefore well connected. I don't believe that you can turn a place in a desert into utopia. You have to start with somewhere that's connected to jobs and services."

He argues that encouraging sustainable ways of living is key, along with a sense of neighbourhood. "To my mind the essence of this is the school being the heart of the community. You need to bring people together, not by building expensive community centres or shops, but by using the school as the hub," says Falk. "In Houten, in Holland, the school has housing above and it's designed so that it can be used for a variety of purposes."

Sustainable urban design must relate development to nature. "I'm very impressed by the wild landscaping you find in Holland or Paris, which gives a much better feeling than the rather sterile hard landscaping that we tend to go for. A sense of stewardship is also essential ▶

**BELOW:** Amersfoort, Holland, waterside housing. Photo credit: Beyond Eco-towns

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Book cover – Good Cities, Better Lives: How Europe Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism by Peter Hall with contributions by Nicholas Falk (Routledge)

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Book cover – Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood: Building the 21st Century Home by David Rudlin and Nicholas Falk (Architectural Press)

to creating sustainable communities. It's about developing places that people will look after. I love One Brighton with its allotments on top of the building."

URBED's winning entry for the Wolfson Economics Prize brings together these and many other strands, arguing for the near-doubling of up to 40 existing large towns in line with garden city principles, to provide new homes for up to 150,000 people per town built

over 30-35 years. To develop the concept, the entry imagines a fictional town called Uxcester and applies that concept to Oxford, showing how Oxford could rival the strategy adopted by Cambridge for growth and expansion.

The choice of these cities is far from random. Falk has been advising the joint venture between Oxford City Council and Grosvenor Estates on an urban extension to Oxford at Barton Park. He also initiated the Oxford

Futures process and, previously, produced the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth.

Such is Falk's prodigious work ethic that one cannot imagine him slackening any time soon. Even so, he admits that "should the world turn its back on me, I could just go down to the cellar in Stroud and build something more for my railway". [sh](#)

## FURTHER READING

**Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood: Building the 21st Century Home** by David Rudlin and Nicholas Falk (Architectural Press)

**Good Cities, Better Lives: How Europe Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism** by Peter Hall with contributions by Nicholas Falk (Routledge)

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Read Roger Hunt's blog [www.huntwriter.com](http://www.huntwriter.com) and follow him on Twitter @huntwriter

