

why not here?

Following on from articles in the preceding two issues on learning from the best in European urban development and regeneration through TCPA study tour trips to Germany and the Netherlands, **Nicholas Falk** and **Peter Hall** distil and compare the lessons offered and consider how European experience can best be applied in British cities and towns



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Study tour group members exploring Ecolonia, Alpen aan den Rijn, in the Netherlands

We in the UK need urgently to start learning from Europe: specifically, from mainland European best practice in urban development and regeneration, which in some cities is far in advance of ours. That was the inspiration behind the two TCPA study tours last September – to Amersfoort and other growth areas in the Netherlands, and to Freiburg in Germany, with side visits to tram systems in Karlsruhe and the French city of Strasbourg. The TCPA plans to continue them this spring, with a visit to Scandinavia.

Meanwhile, we have reported to *Town & Country Planning* readers on the lessons to be learned so

far: from Freiburg (in the article by Peter Hall in the November 2008 issue) and from Amersfoort (in the piece by Nicholas Falk in December). One of us (Nicholas Falk) has also co-authored a major report, published last October,¹ which presents observations from a wider array of European examples, including Stockholm's Hammarby Sjöstad, Hamburg's HafenCity, Hannover's Kronstadt, and Dublin's Adamstown. Here, we try to distil and compare those lessons – and, in particular, to consider the difficult question of how we can best seek to apply them in British cities and towns.

The lessons

The lessons can be summarised under three headings:

- First, what kinds of development work best, in what kinds of places?
- Secondly, what kinds of administrative structures will best deliver the desired development?
- Thirdly, and associatedly, what kinds of financial mechanisms will be needed to achieve this delivery?

What kinds of development?

Freiburg and Amersfoort present remarkably similar pictures. Both are medium-sized cities (populations: Freiburg 218,000, Amersfoort 139,000), comparable to a typical county town in England. Both have developed sustainable urban extensions, closely integrated with the existing urban fabric and well connected to their city centres by excellent public transport systems: Amersfoort also features a completely new station on the Dutch national railway system.

The internal design of these new neighbourhoods differs somewhat between the two cities: in Freiburg's Vauban and Rieselfeld there is a rather conventional grid pattern of streets bisected by a wide main boulevard carrying a central tram route; in Amersfoort's Kattenbroek, Nieuwland and Vathorst a series of small neighbourhoods closely resemble

of insulation and good levels of air tightness, and allow use to be made of industrialised methods of construction with rapid build-out rates, meaning that it proves possible to achieve a complete low-energy community relatively quickly.

Are these conditions reproducible in our cities and towns? Almost certainly, in the medium-sized towns which loom so large in the Department for Communities and Local Government's (CLG's) Sustainable Communities strategy. Developments like Northampton's Upton or Peterborough's The Hamptons are the UK equivalents, albeit not designed to the same standards. Similar developments could be achieved in the East Northamptonshire towns of Wellingborough, Kettering and Corby, all designated for major growth in the Milton Keynes-South Midlands Sub-Regional Strategy – or in North Harlow on the M11 growth corridor.

But there is a problem here: most of the proposed eco-towns in the CLG's list – in fact all but Pennbury-Stoughton, just outside Leicester – do not follow this model. They are isolated garden cities recalling Howard's original 1898 proposal – but even then, he proposed that they should be developed as parts of much larger clusters, linked by a public transport system, which these proposals for the most part lack.

One or two eco-towns, close to medium-sized cities like Oxford and Cambridge where growth is constrained by green belts, could perhaps be developed on Howard's 'Social City' pattern, as satellite garden cities linked to the central city by busways and bikeways: Northstowe, north of Cambridge on the new guided busway, provides a model. Likewise, Marston Vale in Bedfordshire, a linear eco-city that effectively links Bedford with Milton Keynes via a new bus rapid transit system, could be justified as a special kind of urban extension. But most of the proposals are much more isolated than that, and hence their problem is that however high their aspirations, they may too easily degenerate into car-dependent commuter dormitories: Cambourne, the new community west of Cambridge, provides a dreadful how-not-to example. Significantly several schemes are emerging with local authority support, including one to the north of Norwich, and another outside Bicester, which could show the way forward.

What kinds of administrative structures?

Freiburg and Amersfoort are crucially similar in another respect: in both, the development process was strongly led by the city planners. Freiburg's is the stronger model: in both Vauban and Rieselfeld the city owned the land (the first was an old French army barracks acquired by the German government and sold on to the city; the second was a sewage works) and exercised total control over the process.

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those in British new town designs of the 1940s. Both, however, share a similar street structure, with roads that give priority to walking, cycling and public transport over the use of the private car. All were designed as mixed-development communities, combining different kinds of tenure close together, even in adjacent blocks. All seemed to achieve high standards of community involvement, both in the initial design process and then in management; more on this below.

It goes without saying that all these new communities are designed to very high standards of environmental sustainability. None aims to be zero-carbon; that would have been regarded as unrealistic. But, in all, homes achieve high standards

Amersfoort's model might be more relevant for the UK: here, the local authority had intervened with private landowners to ensure that public and private land would be combined and planned as a coherent whole. It set up the Vathorst Development Company as a joint venture. All this was helped by the fact that key decisions were taken locally, at city level, or at a sub-regional level, making them independent of the vagaries of national funding programmes. Also, the joint venture was able to access low-cost loan finance for putting in infrastructure. The local authority had the financial capacity and the skills to manage and direct such large projects – a process that would deter all but

for ourselves, resulted in some outstandingly high-quality and family-friendly environments.

In contrast, with one or two exceptions, our eco-town proposals have almost all come from private developers – sometimes with the support of the local authority, quite often in direct opposition to them. Apart from the obvious danger that they will be trying to deliver a superior (and therefore, at least initially, relatively expensive) model of development, difficult to sell in a bleak economic climate, the obvious question must be how committed they are to the model in the first place. The Eco-Towns Challenge Panel felt that some were, some weren't. Probably, the parting advice to us from Freiburg's chief planner



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In Amsterdam, a boat trip provided an opportunity for the study tour group to consider new perspectives

the largest and best-resourced English cities. Although the private sector was involved, it was on the city's terms: they had to work within a framework controlled by the city planners, working towards an overall vision. And it seems to have helped that – in contrast to the overwhelming role of the big volume-builders here in the UK – many of the builders and investors in Amersfoort and Freiburg were relatively local.

Finally, particularly in the Freiburg model, local communities were actively involved with architects in designing the details of their homes and the communal open space, through so-called 'design groups' (*Baugruppen*), working closely with their own architect-designers. This process, as we saw

Wulf Daseking – 'Don't let the developers near. They won't develop.' – may have been too harsh. But his preferred model, which is to admit the developers only on the city's terms, has to be the right one.

What model of finance?

That last conclusion is intimately connected with the question of finance. In Freiburg and Amersfoort, as in other best-practice examples across Europe, the city finances major up-front infrastructure investments itself, in advance of construction – in public transport, in sustainable water recycling and sewerage systems, and in waste collection and recycling. This is more effective, and in particular more economic, if these

investments are made on a relatively big scale – in fact area-wide – covering thousands of new homes.

Such investments are more easily made if the city itself has direct control over financing of investment. In mainland European countries this is possible because municipalities have retained direct control over such services, over a 60-year period during which we in the UK have successively nationalised them under Labour and privatised them under the Conservatives. Even when a UK city has some semblance of responsibility, more often than not it is at the whim of central government financing programmes which are subject to protracted delay and even cancellation. A classic example is the regional transport investment programme, which the Department for Transport first announced it was devolving to the Regional Assemblies to prioritise projects, and then promptly proceeded to second-guess their choices. Coherent planning and delivery in these circumstances is virtually impossible.

And this is doubly unfortunate in comparison with continental cities, which are then able to enlist the private sector into a rapid co-ordinated construction programme which delivers entire new neighbourhoods quickly, thus recouping the return on their investment and also obtaining additional benefits in the form of developer agreements, especially for the provision of social infrastructure like parks, playgrounds and swimming pools.



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Study four participants examining a model of the Vathorst development – such models are a feature of Dutch development visitor centres, helping prospective residents to visualise what it will be like to live in a place before it is built

Applying the lessons

So what difficulties can we foresee in applying these lessons here; and how might we overcome them? Our two tours taught us one salutary lesson: where Britain once led the world, we now lag far behind. It is simply unrealistic to call on our local authorities to ‘leapfrog’ over other countries, as

John Callcutt did in his report,² because in comparison with their European counterparts they suffer from four critical constraints. First, they lack the powers. Second, they lack the resources. Third, they lack the professional competence. And fourth, they lack the necessary knowledge of best practice. Each of these constraints needs urgently to be remedied.

Powers

It is unrealistic to ask local authorities to produce home-grown examples of best practice without a major increase in their freedom to act and to spend. Either the Government has to state openly that it thinks they are not up to the job (as effectively the 1945 Labour government declared when it handed the new towns programme to the New Town Development Corporations or the 1979 Conservative government did when it gave the job of urban regeneration to the Urban Development Corporations), or it has to accept that cities are now fully competent to act, either alone or – in circumstances where it is appropriate – in co-operation, through city-regional Multi-Area Agreements.

This points to a lesson: in one important way, the question of location is secondary. The ‘Social City’, the idea of ‘eco-neighbourhoods’ and the European examples are all equally good models. Just as in the 1950s and 1960s we renewed our cities while building new towns outside them, so now there is room for different ways of achieving the basic goal of sustainable urbanism. Indeed, in the eco-towns programme the Government should deliberately encourage more than one model, in order to assess how well each works.

The key question is not where to build, but rather how we get there from here, and on a scale that would make a difference. The current crisis could well see the rebirth of ideas such as co-housing and co-operatives generally to enable groups of people to secure a better quality of life than they can on the open market, along with new forms of ‘mutual’ tenure that go beyond the crude distinction between owner-occupation and renting. But such breakthroughs cannot flourish unless local authorities can see their role as midwives for change, and not just as regulators.

Resources

The implication is radical: it is that local authorities should take the lead not just in commissioning masterplans, but in again writing such plans themselves, and further – given the chronic current weakness of the private sector – in raising funds for the necessary supporting infrastructure. This means an end to the nonsense where government devolves investment decisions and promptly takes them back again. It cannot be too strongly stressed that without this guarantee in place early on in the



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Open space at Freiburg's Rieselfeld, with pond fed by natural drainage

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development process, there can be no hope of achieving exemplary sustainable development.

Professional competence

We should remember that the success of the UK new towns was not just due to the forceful theories of a few idealists or the urgency of the need for better homes, but to a climate in which government encouraged innovation and experimentation. New Town Development Corporations were set up to manage the complex tasks of preparing sites for development, and were loaned the funds to put in basic infrastructure. Dedicated design and

implementation teams were built up and maintained over many years, not subject to government whims or dependent on consultants who come and go.

In contrast, British planners today have increasingly been reduced to the role of development control box-tickers. Strategic visions are not encouraged. Even if they were, it is not at all clear that the average local authority planning department could manage the kind of role we saw in Amersfoort or Freiburg. Training has little status, and tends to be limited to helping individuals to understand statutory requirements, or achieve professional qualifications, rather than enabling teams to work together better on complex issues involving many different specialised skills. There is an army of potential support ranging from ATLAS and CABE to Regional Centres of Excellence, but planning committees – who increasingly and whimsically override the advice of their own professional staff – tend to rely on the prejudices of neighbourhood voters, or on what the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* (congenitally hostile to eco-development) have to say on the subject.

There are a few encouraging signs. The recent emphasis on Regional Spatial Strategies and their successors, along with the Sub-National Review and the Government's support for Multi-Area Agreements, suggest that some politicians and officials in key positions in the Treasury and CLG actually want to see the UK following best European practice.

Of course we still need further research into what works and why, but this needs to feed directly into

Thinking along different lines – a participant’s view

One study tour participant afterwards wrote:

‘thank you for such an interesting and diverse study tour... It has changed my view – though I like to think that I always was interested in promoting different environments and more interesting living areas – in as much as I now feel more able to make suggestions about thinking along different lines. This country has very set outlooks and I think planning officers need to think outside the box a bit more... perhaps more officers as well as members should be included, particularly some of the younger ones, as it is they who are more receptive to new ideas and will perhaps get round to implementing them in the future. We are still very backward with energy efficiency and in introducing new building methods etc.’

And coming up in 2009...

TCPA Study Tour to Malmo, Sweden

The TCPA is currently planning a study tour to Malmo in Sweden, often known as the ‘City of Parks’ and rated by some as one of the world’s greenest cities. The tour is planned for the end of April – provisional dates 28 April - 1 May, inclusive.

The tour to Malmo and its surrounding areas will provide first-hand experience of how planners, politicians and communities in the city are working to tackle a variety of environmental and social issues, many of which face us here in the UK. It will focus on how the city’s communities and leaders are continuing to help transform a once industrial sea port into a knowledge-based city and an exemplar of sustainable development.

If you are interested in joining the TCPA tour please contact Chloe Theobald, Education & Events Manager, at chloe.theobald@tcpa.org.uk, or call 020 7930 8903

groups that are responsible for implementing major projects, and in a form they can easily digest. The so-called Egan ‘wheel of skills needed’³ was a great start, but it has more dimensions than most people can manage. In Cambridgeshire, and now in research on eco-towns,⁴ a simple classification into four or five ‘Cs’ seems to help – under the themes of connectivity, character, community and climate-

proofing, with the cross-cutting themes of connectivity and possibly cash flow.⁵ Learning has to be made much easier and more fun.

Knowledge of best practice

We found that successful European cities were far keener to learn, and communicate their experience, often in excellent English, than their British equivalents. This reduced the risks and enabled them to secure efficiencies by climbing the ‘learning curve’ – whereas we seem to have a ‘forgetting curve’, where experience is discarded as irrelevant, and where an initiative like Millennium Villages is dismissed as merely one of John Prescott’s creations.

This is why the old TCPA tradition of study tours was – and is – so important. Study tours are all about learning together. The success of what is called ‘action learning’ or ‘experiential learning’ lies in changing attitudes and behaviour. This can only happen if people see things for themselves, rather than relying on the printed word or the internet. As the Prince of Wales has often argued, ‘seeing is believing’. Yet in the UK we are very bad at providing enough space or time for what URBED calls ‘looking and learning’.

In particular (and here the TCPA should declare an interest) the new Homes and Communities Agency really needs to make it a condition that the local authorities they support should set time and money aside for learning, not only for attending conferences, but also for taking part in study tours, and joining learning networks. Public bodies have not yet woken up to the fact that most people suffer from information overload, and that you need a toolshed to house all the toolkits that have been produced!

So, dear reader, why not use Eurostar, the French TGV and the German ICE, plus their linking network of light railways, to discover how our European neighbours are starting to live, and to ask yourselves: why not here too?

● **Dr Nicholas Falk** is the founder director of URBED.

Sir Peter Hall is Professor of Planning and Regeneration at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, and President of the TCPA. The views expressed here are personal.

Notes

- 1 *Beyond Eco-towns: Applying the Lessons from Europe: Report and Conclusions*. PRP Architects, URBED and Design for Homes. PRP Architects, 2008
- 2 *Callcutt Review of Housebuilding Delivery*. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007
- 3 *The Egan Review: Skills for Sustainable Communities*. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004
- 4 *Regeneration in European Cities: Making Connections*. URBED for Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008. www.urbed.co.uk
- 5 See *Beyond Eco-towns* (see note 1), or Google the HCA Academy showcase for eco-town case studies developed by ERBEDU (European Regional Business and Economic Development Unit) and URBED