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(To find out more about David, please see the biographies section at the back of this booklet)

The day of the Triffids

Abstract

This is the story of a green monster that grew and grew and ended up swallowing the city that it was meant to save. For years we have sought to reform the city, reducing its density and increasing the amount of open space. This can be traced from the Victorian park to the garden city culminating in Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse. Green space is important for social and environmental reasons. However, like many good things, these benefits do not necessarily increase in proportion to the amount of space provided. There comes a point where there is so much open space that densities fall to levels where urban areas become unsustainable. This can, however, be overcome through design. The design of open space is vital and if done badly, will undermine all of the potential benefits. If done well, the smallest of spaces can have a huge impact.

Introduction

It's a risky business presenting a paper at a conference on open space that argues that open space is not always a good thing. However, there are very few 'good things' that don't become a problem if taken to excess and open space in cities is one of them. I will argue in this paper that the historical drive to increase the level of open space in our cities is important but that the crucial issue is the quality of open space rather than the quantity. Too much ill-defined open space undermines the quality, safety, efficiency and sustainability of urban areas.

Staring at the SUN

My interest at URBED, for the last 20 years, has been how to create successful, sustainable urban neighbourhoods. This started in the 1990s with our involvement in the redevelopment of the Hulme estate in Manchester and later a series of research projects[1] that became the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood (SUN) Initiative[2] funded by the UK Government and the EU.

Our starting point was the belief that the pattern of settlements in the UK at the end of the 20th century was profoundly unsustainable. Rather than focus, as much research on sustainability did, on the design of energy-efficient homes, we argued that the pattern of settlements was the big sustainability issue. The gradual accretion of low-density suburbs was hollowing out our towns and cities. The average density of new housing at the time was 23 units/ha and the most rapidly increasing source of CO2 emissions was transport.

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Theme: *inclusive design and sustainable community planning*

There was much debate, perhaps heated argument would be more accurate, in the 1990s about the acceptability of forcing people back into cities. The population was voting with their feet for leafy suburbia and should not be dragged kicking and screaming back to dark,

1 *Rudlin, D. and Falk, N. (1995) Building to Last: 21st Century Homes. York: The Joseph Rowntree Foundation.*
2 *Rudlin, R. (ed) (1998-2006) – 'SUN Dial' [occasional journal], URBED (Urbanism Environment Design).*

overcrowded dangerous and dirty cities – or so we were told. We were called 'new Jacobites' by our critics, something meant as a criticism but which of course made us enormously happy![3] In actual fact the aim of the SUN Initiative was not to force or cajole or even to regulate. We wanted to make cities so attractive that people would want to move back.

On the whole in the last 15 years this is largely what has happened. We can argue about the property bubble in city-centre apartments, but overall, a huge amount of urban housing has been built in the UK in the last decade, much of it very successful. The density of new housing has risen to 43 units/ha and the proportion of new housing in built urban areas to just over 70%[4] (apologies, these are English figures). Whether this will continue is unclear as the housebuilders retreat to suburbia in their post-recession agitation and the government gently loosens the strings of planning policy. Yet I believe that something has changed and UK cities will never again be the same.

Back in the 1990s the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood was developed as a model of high-density mixed-use urban development that could attract people back to urban areas. Of course, other sustainable urban models are also available in the shops, including the Urban Village, the American Pedestrian Pocket, the Eco Quartiere in France, sustainable urban extensions in Germany and the Bo neighbourhoods of Scandinavia. However, back in the 1990s, it was difficult to point to UK examples. Indeed we wrote at the time that there was not one planned neighbourhood created in the UK in the 20th century that would merit conservation area status in the future. Not one place that people really loved, that had the richness and diversity of a historic town or even a Georgian or Victorian suburb. So we had to content ourselves with field trips to Amsterdam, Frieburg or Malmo to learn how to build good high-density housing. We have got better since then, with early examples like Crown Street in Glasgow and Hulme in Manchester and more recently, Millennium Villages and city-centre apartment schemes that are a half decent attempt to create sustainable urban form. But it still doesn't come easily to us and it is interesting to ask why this is.

Why is it so difficult?

There are many reasons for this: the lack of ambition in the UK development industry, the conservatism of house buyers, the sprawl of our cities, etc. However, as someone who started my career as a local authority planner, I started to realise that one of the problems is the planning system itself. In other words, the very system created to improve towns and cities is part of the reason why many of them are so crap.

This is the central theme of the book I co-authored with Nicholas Falk republished last year as Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood[5]. In this we describe how the Victorian industrial city became so awful that the English at least lost faith in the very idea of cities. Planning was

3 *New Jacobite was meant as a reference to being a slavish follower of Jane Jacobs and particularly her 1961 book, The Death and Life of Great American Cities.*
4 *DCLG (2006) Land Use Change in England: Residential Development to 2005 – (LUCS–21).*
5 *Rudlin, R. and Falk, N. (2009) Sustainable Urban neighbourhood: Building the 21st century home. Oxford: Elsevier, The Architectural Press.*

brought into existence not to make cities more beautiful, as happened in France, but to tame them and smooth off their rough edges. This included sanitation, pollution, sunlight, housing standards, traffic, safety and, of course... green space.

In cities without a tree or a scrap of open space, the Victorian parks movement is one of our greatest legacies. Every evening I walk my dogs in Alexandra Park on the edge of Moss Side in Manchester, opened in 1868 and still a beautiful space and remarkably safe given its location. At a time when the sea of terraces in Moss Side around the park were entirely unrelieved by greenery or play space or even private gardens, the park must have been a wonder.

The next stage in the taming of the city came with the garden city movement at the beginning of the 20th century[6]. This took the argument to another level by redesigning the city around sunlight, fresh air and… open space. We remember now the early schemes by the garden city pioneers like Hampstead Garden Suburb and Welwyn Garden City that were to be such influential models for 20th-century planners. We forget the theory within which they sat that suggested that the garden city would cover the whole country, with a dispersed network of low-density settlements incorporating within them their own agriculture and recreational space. In the US, something similar was developed by Frank Lloyd Wright called Broadacre[7], in which every American family was to be given their own acre of land so that they were self-sufficient yet still be able to get around by high-speed personal transport (helicopters).

It is clear that density and open space were a source of debate at the time. In 1912, Raymond Unwin published a pamphlet called 'Nothing gained by overcrowding'[8] . This argued that, for a given number of people, there was a requirement of so much open space, school grounds, recreational facilities, etc. As the density of housing rose, these requirements increased, taking more and more land. Efforts to increase housing density were therefore subject to a law of diminishing returns because higher densities reduced the amount of land available for housing. Mind you, the ideal garden city density was 15 units/acre, which translates to 37 units/ha, considerably higher than the 23u/ha mentioned earlier.

Next came Le Corbusier who was a great architect but completely mad when it came to urban planning or for that matter social reform. His plans for the Ville Radieuse in Paris solved Unwin's dilemma by building on stilts. He proposed a city where the entire land area was open space with the people, shops, schools and workspaces accommodated in towers on piloti floating over the rolling landscape. It would be mad had it not been taken so seriously through the work of CIAM (Congress International de l'Architecture Moderne) which for many years was the leading urban think tank in Europe publishing its Charter of Athens in 1933 and holding a major congress in Coventry in 1952[9] from which the city has never really recovered.

The influence of this history can be seen in every suburb and council estate from the second half of the 20th century. The suburb is marked with an obsession with private space, the council

6 *Howard, E. (1898) Tomorrow: A peaceful path to real reform, (republished 1902 as Garden Cities of Tomorrow), TCPA.*

7 *Fishman, R. (1982) Urban utopias in the 20th century. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.*

8 *Unwin, R. (1912) – Nothing gained by overcrowding.*

9 *Congress International de l'Architecture Moderne (1952) Congress Proceedings, CIAM.*

estate with a fetish about public space, much of it undulating and dotted with trees, useless for wildlife or indeed playing football and dangerous to cross at night.

How much is too much?

Green space is important in a city, it provides space for recreation, play and sports, it allows ecological diversity, helps microclimate and enhances visual appeal. However, like many good things, these benefits do not necessarily increase in proportion to the amount of open space provided. There comes a point where there is so much open space (both public and private) that the density of activity fall to levels where it is no longer possible to support local shops and facilities, where bus services are no longer viable, where walking distances become such that everyone drives, where the lack of other pedestrians makes places feel unsafe, where unsupervised open areas are taken over by gangs of youths and become difficult to maintain. You can have too much of a good thing.

Open space standards in England are set by each local authority and they vary across the country. We have worked in areas where the standard is based on proximity in terms of how far every home should be from a local play area, park, etc. Often they are based on a certain amount of open space per house or per person. For many years, the 'gold standard' for open space provision was the National Playing Field Association's six-acre standard first published in 1925. The most recent version was published in 2008[10] . This sets a standard of 1.6ha of sports fields and 0.8ha of play provision per 1,000 people as well as standards for proximity. Natural England[11] has also produced standards for natural green space based on area and proximity (every home within 300m of a 2ha natural space) and a provision standard of 1ha/1000 people to a nature reserve. The National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners[12] has a standard of 20 plots per 1000 households. Some authorities also have standards for private space. This is all very confusing but what is clear is that the amount of open space in our plans is never enough.

It is not my intention here to get into the complexity of standards, however, it is clear from our experience that these standards are doable in suburban developments such as a scheme of 1600 units that we have been developing in Wigan. Here we have 37ha of housing land and just under 13ha of open space, which would meet the six-acre standard (depending on the mix and occupancy figures used). This results in 1ha of open space for every 3ha of housing land (1:3). However, in urban areas, the situation is very different and in London we have just got planning consent for a scheme of high density two- and three-bed apartments, where the standard would have required 2ha of open space for every 3ha of development (1:1.5). It is these latter urban situations that are the problem, perhaps unsurprisingly given that the six-acre standard came out of the garden city movement.

10 *FIT (Fields in Trust)(formerly the National Playing Field Association) (2008) Planning and Design for Outdoor Play. Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire: FIT.*
11 *Natural England (2010) 'Nature Nearby' Accessible Natural Greenspace Guidance, NE265.*
12 *www.nsalg.org.uk/*

It is instructive to compare these ratios to the open space ratios of our great cities. London, with its tradition of great parks, has an open space ratio of 1:7[13] and Paris is similar. My point is that open space standards, like many of the rules that regulate development, remain a reaction to the Victorian city. We have spent a century trying to right a wrong. We have instigated planning policies, housing standards, privacy distances, density guidelines, highway standards and of course, open space yardsticks to try and reform the city. Each profession has been busy optimising their particular area of responsibility but cities aren't like that. Optimise one area and others will suffer. Cities are a set of messy compromises, nothing is perfect but the whole is more than the sum of these messy parts.

The principles of design

We need a new approach to open space in urban areas, one that focuses not so much on quantity as on quality. The benefits of open space relate to the way in which it is designed. As I said, every evening I walk my dogs in Alexandra Park in the middle of Moss Side in Manchester. This is, supposedly, one of the most dangerous parts of the city but the park is one of the safest places, because of the way it is designed. Contrast this to, say, the Medlock Valley running through East Manchester. This was designed as a green corridor and a recreational resource for the surrounding communities. Some parts work, but others are characterised by burnt-out cars, graffiti and vandalism. The difference is the way that the space is designed.

Many of the principles of good open space design are the same as those that guide good urban spaces. In rural areas, isolation and solitude may be a good thing, but in a city, safety and security comes from other people. Alexandra Park, like many traditional parks, works because there are generally enough people around with good intentions to make it feel safe. These include the dog-walkers, like myself, fishermen, parents and children on their way to the day centre in the heart of the park, cyclists using the cycle route that crosses the park at a diagonal, the football teams and the Asian cricket league that seems to play at some unearthly hour in the morning. There are many others and they change with the seasons from the sunbathers in the summer to the kids on their new bikes on Christmas day. All of this, remember, in a park that is in the heart of Moss Side, supposedly one of the most dangerous districts in Manchester.

Local green spaces, pocket parks and playgrounds have different rules. Here the security of 'other people' generally comes from the people in the surrounding buildings (or at least the perception that there may be people overlooking the space). Like good streets, small green spaces feel safe when they are small enough to be overlooked by surrounding roads, housing and other buildings. Too often spaces are designed to the rear of houses and away from roads on the basis that this will make them safer. This can work in suburban areas, but in urban neighbourhoods, it can often mean that these spaces are not supervised and therefore attract youths and become a target for antisocial behaviour.

Very local space tends to be in private gardens and it is important that urban housing includes

13 *Rudlin, D. and Hemani, S. (forthcoming) Climax City.*

private space. In apartment schemes, this takes the form of private courtyards, balconies and roof gardens and for housing, it means gardens and terraces. The important thing about this private space is security; strangers shouldn't be able to access the space without fear of challenge. This is obvious for private gardens but is often overlooked for communal space in apartment schemes. The easiest and most traditional way of doing this is to use the perimeter block, which creates a clear definition between external public space and internal private space. In most urban areas this private space makes the largest contribution to the green infrastructure of the area. I live in a Victorian suburb that has no public open space but which is full of wildlife and almost obscured on the aerial photographs by its trees.

Don't get me wrong

It is not that I am anti-open space, far from it. I just object to the view that the more green space we have, the better it will be. Too much green space not only becomes a problem in its own right in terms of management and security, it also undermines the qualities of urbanism that are so important to the safe functioning of towns and cities. Too much green space – which is what many standards still demand – means that densities are reduced, children are too far from school not to be driven, buses become unviable, shops lack sufficient local customers to survive so that the people have to drive to the supermarket and neighbourhoods lack activity and feel unsafe. A balance needs to be struck between the benefits that open space brings and these impacts on urban life. Good urban areas should be net contributors to biodiversity with trees, green walls and roofs, gardens and balconies. They should have a hierarchy of open space and while suburban areas may be able to meet the 6-acre standard, urban areas can probably meet only half of this. However, even in the densest urban areas, these open spaces through good design can do twice the work and can become spaces that people love, which was something that never happened to Le Corbusier's green landscape.