Leading the effective planning and design of low carbon and sustainable cities: examples from policy and practice from Europe and elsewhere

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Today I am putting the view that

Since 1990s increasing research and applied interest among planners in ways to produce, renew and manage healthy, resilient, low-carbon settlement forms in increasingly urbanised world.

Planners’ concerns have become progressively integrated across land use, spatial and strategic planning

Have incorporated insights from disciplines including urban design, political economy and environmental science to enrich both theory and practice.
Start by looking at research undertaken in 1990s about **sustainable cities** - foreshadowing our current situation

Focus in on present day **governance** capacity in planning

Consider **food policy** as a thematic area for effective action through urban planning

Explore **food retrofitting** approaches now being employed
Context
Work by the OECD (Parham and Konvitz: 1996) and others showed way cities planned, designed and governed can make enormous difference to achieving resilience in many areas – including food.

Identified problematic gap between knowledge and planning – action taken only after irretrievable changes occurred – this especially evident in relation to climate change.
The view from the mid 1990s...

“Policies for urban areas, including both city-centres and suburbs, must combine and integrate environmental, social and economic objectives. Traditional sectoral policies, which focus predominantly on the reduction of pollution in the manufacturing and distribution sectors, cannot address urban congestion associated with private car use, wasteful water and waste management practices, overbuilding on the urban periphery, and the high consumption of energy and other resources. Urban environmental problems are highly inter-related: they involve everyday routines of households and firms: and they are too big and diffuse for government to solve through regulation or legislation.”

“Major changes in lifestyles, in patterns of urban development, and in the practices of businesses in the manufacturing and service sectors will have to accompany more effective policy instruments if progress is to be achieved. Governments at the national, state and municipal levels must co-operate to implement coherent, integrated policies.”

(S Parham, J Konvitz, OECD, 1996)
The view from the mid-1990s...

“The pursuit of sustainability will always take place in a climate of uncertainty. For this reason, **priority must be given to those factors which enhance the capacity of cities to adapt** over the years to come. Such factors include a comprehensive approach to open space, wetlands, and other natural sites within and in the environs of urban areas; multi-functional land-use patterns; strategies for the adaptive re-use of existing structures; coordinated land use and transport planning; and spatial patterns that enhance accessibility while reducing exclusive reliance on private car use.”

In addition, to be adaptable and responsive, cities need lifelong educational systems; community organisations that broaden the public involvement in government; strategic planning procedures; the capacity to undertake research on local needs; and structures for joint decision-making among different jurisdictions in a given metropolitan area.”

(S Parham, J Konvitz, OECD, 1996)
“It is not for government to build the Ecological City, but to provide the framework of rules, incentives and **strategic planning** that can channel the activities of the firms and people living, working and investing in cities. This will take an act of will: in the absence of war, natural disaster or economic collapse, the opportunities to introduce new approaches to urban development must be created”.

We recognised some serious challenges to that act of will:

Long range vision and consistency in the pursuit of policy objectives
Adaptability of solutions to local conditions
Fiscal constraints on undertaking recognised best solutions
Inadequacy of existing policies to achieve necessary urban goals
Need for change to be world wide – not just rich countries

Two serious challenges identified then deserve a closer look:

“There is a considerable lag between the introduction of new policies and programmes, and their effects. Decisions must be made now that will effect the future. How can policies and plans be design, implemented, evaluated and revised to cope with rapid change in a context of uncertainty? Given the unpredictable nature of environmental change and the rapid pace of urban development, how can policies be designed that will be effective over many years?

Many recommendations for the improvement of urban environmental conditions call for changes in lifestyles, cultural and social patterns, and economic structures. But people who believe that current living arrangements provide an adequate level of comfort, convenience and cleanliness will be unwilling to accept radical changes to their communities. How can public support be nurtured and sustained? What are the advantages and constraints of greater public participation and voluntary approaches? What do people need to know about the urban environment in order to make a positive contribution?”

(S Parham, J Konvitz, OECD, 1996: 15-16)
Mustn’t forget how political this is – especially tension between short and long term…

“Governments have traditionally been inhibited in pursuing environmental policy because of the short political horizons within which that have to work. There is always a tension between meeting present needs and future requirements. This tension is exacerbated by the public “issue attention cycle”. Associated with this question of short versus longer term is the political difficulty which may be encountered in promoting best practice. Governments have often chosen techniques which are not technically optimal for urban conditions, but are tailored instead to various political requirements, inadvertently increasing community resistance to change.”

(S Parham, J Konvitz, OECD, 1996: 64)
A lot of action needed seen to be in the realm of planning. Good practice examples of:

Scenario building and strategic planning
Strategies at city level
Community participation
Community based design approaches
Demonstration and pilot projects integrating transport and land use, housing and area regeneration, waste and recycling, greening
Partnership working to manage urban change
National/local agreements
Charters, contracts and networks
Organisational and institutional reforms
Innovation in financial and regulatory instruments

(S Parham, J Konvitz, OECD, 1996: )
And noted cautionary tales of deregulation of planning...

“The perceived constraints of statutory planning requirements have seen some governments move to bypass traditional regulatory arrangements altogether. Enterprise zones and simplified planning zones with minimal planning controls, special development orders, architectural competitions and urban development corporations with wide powers have been thought to provide a more favourable environment for investment and job creation and a more propitious climate for heterogeneous development (Thornley, 1991). These innovations have often been associated with the downgrading of environmental quality as an urban issue and a tendency to privilege economic development over other valid policy concerns”.

(S Parham, J Konvitz, OECD, 1996: 126)
In early 2000s work on urban governance and on ageing, housing and cities suggested:

“In a context of increasing urban sprawl and the development of agglomerations, there is piecemeal responsibility for different aspects of urban policy, a layering of institutions and increasing spatial segregation as well as social inequality. We are now entering a society of networks, so actions in towns depend on a whole range of players that are not necessarily local or governmental.

Urban governance and population issues are major concerns in cities that can be expected to have significant impacts in future. Economic globalisation and technological advances are making governments reassess roles, responsibilities and financial arrangements, previously handled through the welfare state. The other key contextual issue is the demographic revolution of population ageing that is profoundly changing the structure of society. There remain problematic lag times between understanding ageing trends and reflecting these in legislation, institutions, budgets and private sector initiatives for older people”.

So what is the urban development picture like now?
Trends evident then being more fully played out now. Practice of planning occurring against backdrop of large areas of change and uncertainty:

- Economic downturn and economic insecurity
- Increasing inequality and social exclusion
- Sustainability issues – water, energy, food - and climate change
- Demographic change – aging cities
- Large scale migrations – rural to urban, country to country, region to region, place to place
- Terrorism, violence, and the ‘crisis of the state’
- The democratic deficit
Ageing places, young places
Rural depopulation
A drift to the cities
A legacy of ‘Corbusian’ inspired approaches to planning and designing cities
Large areas planned to fit a post-war model of ‘mono-functional’ suburban growth
An inheritance of urban development approaches that have proved a failure in planning terms to create liveable places
A ‘heritage’ of leftover spaces such as ‘slaburbs’
Post-suburban ‘sprawl urbanism’ at a massive scale…
Urban conurbations that are now global — more than half the world’s population lives in cities/urban regions

Conurbation development in Belgium
Planning for landscapes of consumption with ‘streets’ that mimic public space – but ignore key principles for place making
‘Big box’ retailing, logistics and customer fulfilment centres
Exit ramp design, planning and architecture of out-of-town business park workspaces
Problematic approaches to renewing existing areas - insensitive to place
A focus on ‘object’ architecture rather than getting right planning for ‘invisible’ urban fabric of ordinary places in between
Spaces that are unpleasant and difficult for people getting around town.
Difficulties in or failure to adequately plan for severe and sudden climate change risks
Lack of understanding that technical infrastructure fixes are not sufficient to plan places sustainably – and to deal with shocks.
Lack of good urban design input into planning - particularly egregious at a city-region level – correlated with widespread sprawl effects
In relation to climate change reshaping the landscape, widespread context of denial and misinformation.
How is planning responding?
Examples from recent practice
Good governance of place isn’t easy
NPPF experience

“Sustainable development is about positive growth – making economic, environmental and social progress for this and future generations.”

“Development that is sustainable should go ahead, without delay – a presumption in favour of sustainable development that is the basis for every plan, and every decision. This framework sets out clearly what could make a proposed plan or development unsustainable.”

“Dismantling the unaccountable regional apparatus and introducing neighbourhood planning addresses this.”
Planning reforms: councils risk free-for-all

Property developers could be free to build “what they like, where they like” under the Coalition’s controversial planning rules, the Government has admitted.

Under the new planning rules, every council is required to publish details of land available for development. Photo: ALAMY
Royal Town Planning Institute’s view 2011

“The draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is a missed opportunity. We are concerned that the draft NPPF will not secure balanced economic and housing growth across England. It fails to set out a vision for the development that is needed to support a growing population and to promote economic growth across the country and that is effectively linked with infrastructure to redress existing and potential geographical and social disparities.

"Economic growth is generally set to trump the aspirations of local communities expressed in local and neighbourhood plans. The relationship between the presumption in favour of sustainable development and the primacy of locally-led development plans is not clear."

RTPI’s view by 2013

"We support the notion of consolidating national planning policy, yet the draft NPPF was in many respects a missed opportunity in that it is not a spatial document".

“The NPPF as a spatial plan: The NPPF misses an opportunity to express a vision for the development of the country as a whole, recognising the different impacts policies are intended to have in different parts of the country, which runs counter to government commitments, such as that “prosperity must be shared across all parts of the UK”.

The NPPF is not a spatial document. In fact it is not a national planning framework at all, but a series of prescriptions on how localities produce their own frameworks. As a result it is not clear how it relates to the NPSs [National Policy Statements] or to HS2 [High Speed 2 rail line] for example. It doesn’t address the kinds of issues raised recently in the Sunday Telegraph for example (ie where the housing growth will be). People need to be able to debate these issues. The RTPI recently launched a campaign arguing for a Map for England which would provide easily accessible data on these matters – see www.mapforengland.co.uk“