

Foreword to

The higher-density housing agenda and the 'urban renaissance'

Associate Professor Susan Parham
Editor, *Urban Design and Planning*
November 2019

One of the pleasures of editing the journal, *Urban Design and Planning*, is the opportunity to review a rich trove of papers from across the Institute of Civil Engineers' set of peer reviewed journals. We like to periodically look back over a range of papers that have been published by ICE and think about them with the benefit of some historical perspective refracted through contemporary experience. In undertaking this kind of review activity I believe that I am in very good company: other reviewers who have taken on this enjoyable task include the eminent planner, Professor Sir Peter Hall (2008), a great hero of mine. In Sir Peter's case this was to review a paper about the road engineer, Sir James Drake, who was the originator of the national motorway system in the United Kingdom.

Before getting in to the substance of this review, I would like to dwell briefly on Sir Peter's (2008) review of Drake's work because I see some interesting resonances with the paper I discuss here. Sir James Drake apparently proposed the motorway system on a sheet of paper in 1936 when working in Blackpool as its borough surveyor, and developed a blueprint for such a system as county surveyor in Lancashire in 1949 (Hall, 2008). Drake was still advocating for nationwide development of motorways in 1956 (Hall, 2008).

One thing that strikes me about this process as reported by Peter Hall (2008) is that engineering and planning design ideas can take an extensive time to develop into proposals, and proposals into realities, while effects on place and implications for the our long-term future can be profound. What seems clear is that over that part of the twentieth century the idea of a nationwide system of motorways was (broadly but not completely) accepted as a necessary and inevitable aspect and facilitator of economic and spatial progress - with few down sides.

Today, in the midst of a climate emergency our attitudes to road planning and the role of motorised vehicles themselves is much more critical in place making terms. Thus Drake's highly influential - but arguably very authoritarian way of organizing place - with at its heart a narrow engineering led view of what was important in that process, is something we now are rather more critical of than we once were. In a departure from the worldview that perhaps shaped Drake's practice, it is pleasing that in contemporary theory and practice engineers are often in the forefront of thinking holistically about place making through planning and design. And this brings me to the point that the process I have just undertaken of reviewing papers from ICE journals that have been particularly notable in an urban design and planning sense. This has also been a chance to look at how our planning, engineering and urban

design priorities and perspectives have shifted to bring that remarkable alteration about.

The paper that this foreword dwells on is an example of that change. Martin Crookston's *The higher-density housing agenda and the 'urban renaissance'* was published by the Institute of Civil Engineers, in *The Municipal Engineer*, in December 2004 and we are republishing it in this edition of *Urban Design and Planning* as a very notable paper from our 'back catalogue' of ICE publications. I should, of course, declare an interest at this point. I have worked with Martin Crookston as a planning practitioner and we share too an interest in garden cities and garden suburbs about which Martin has written an excellent book, *Garden Suburbs of Tomorrow?: A New Future for the Cottage Estates*. I hope, though, that I can put aside any potential bias when I say what an outstanding paper this is, on a fascinating and important topic in urban design and planning both in the United Kingdom and internationally.

So what of the paper itself? As Martin Crookston (2004) explains in framing *The higher-density housing agenda and the 'urban renaissance'*, in the late 1990s and early 2000s the United Kingdom's government was attempting to do two things in place making terms, which were difficult to make fit together. On the one hand they were trying to increase development densities to deal with problems of sprawl, land wastage, poor use of infrastructure, and environmental and other sustainability ill effects (Crookston, 2004). On the other hand government was also looking to renew towns and cities suffering from decades of social exclusion and urban blight, and developed a programme of 'urban renaissance' in order to bring these intentions together through place making and renewal activities.

This focus on 'urban renaissance' was by no means easy. As Martin Crookston (2004, p.251) notes in his abstract, 'There are real tensions and difficulties as a result; but we do have tools and models of good practice to help us achieve both the quantity and quality of development sought.' The paper usefully starts by setting out the key policy and practice 'thrusts' that the urban renaissance was based on and I reproduce these below from Crookson's (2004) paper:

- 'develop on brownfields not greenfields;
- get the most out of the potential 'urban capacity' of existing towns and cities;
- relate new and intensified housing development to nodes of good public transport service;
- push up new-build housing densities or, at the very least, avoid wastefully low densities;
- shift away from rigid and often over-prescriptive standards, towards a more 'design-based' approach.' (p.252)

This 'urban renaissance' kind of capacity driven, mixed use, walkable, public transport focused, density-gradient producing, polycentric urbanism as a basis for place making is now much more mainstream but at the time its design-led proposals were a very fresh vision in the United Kingdom. This was despite the so-called European City Model (Clos, 2005) being the basis for much of the development

found in its continental European neighbours cities' for many years. In the United Kingdom, a series of highly influential publications hammered home the point about how an urban renaissance could be undertaken and why it needed to be pursued. I remember the excitement (in urban design circles, I'm not sure if other people were quite as entranced as I was) of the arrival of the *Towards an Urban Renaissance* report in 1999, as a result of the work of an Urban Task Force commissioned by the then Deputy Prime Minister, John (now Lord) Prescott who showed a huge interest in urbanism. As an aside, in my view Lord Prescott's role deserves more academic work to consider his record in office as he provided real leadership on sustainable place making including through his Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in early 2000s and development of sustainable communities ideas, guidance, policies and funding.

As well as the *Towards an Urban Renaissance* report, other highly influential publications that Martin Crookston (2004, p.251) cites in his paper include *The White Paper Our Towns & Cities—the Future*; the good practice guide that accompanied the Planning Policy Guidance Note PPG3 (*Better Places to Live—by Design*); the *Urban Design Compendium*; and the 'companion' guide to the old Ministry of Transport design bulletin DB32: *Places, Streets & Movement*). In fact, I still set the *Urban Design Compendium* (updated version) as a text for my Sustainable Planning Masters students as its two volumes remain an extremely useful text for urban designers.

Likewise the design guidance emanating from the Department of Transport proved highly relevant – and radical. *Places, Streets & Movement* and its companion document, *The Manual for Streets*, radically turned the design assumptions underpinning road engineering on their head. Instead of a movement hierarchy based on the preferences of drivers it quite explicitly put pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users at the top of the road user hierarchy. This was a revolutionary – but very welcome – reversal of policy and practice for street design. Thus in 2004 Martin Crookston was able to report that

'The result is that we have some of the best policy and guidance in Europe, but perhaps have rather less evidence of our ability to apply it; and yet a lot of what the guidance contains is a reversion to the good practice that was second nature in British urban development a century or more ago.' (p.251)

So two points emerged – the gap between theory and practice – and the irony that guidance was required to remind people of the lessons of place making from hundreds of years of experience prior to the twentieth century. One reflection is that the nature of that guidance could be seen as a kind of critique of the place making approach – and design, engineering and planning assumptions – embodied in Sir James Drake's national motorway scheme.

Martin Crookston (2004, p.251) then turns his attention in his paper to density as an aspect of this move towards a holistic design-led approach to place making and renewal, identifying a range of densities possible in principle within this 'new

agenda'. Already the difficulties in defining what we mean by density start to make themselves felt, as Crookston (2004) points out that density can refer to dwellings per hectare, habitable rooms per hectare, bed spaces, plot ratio, or net site density, among other density measures. Using examples across this range of possible ways of exploring density Crookston makes a number of fascinating observations from this primary data. First, much of what has been built in the United Kingdom in the 50 years up until 2004 is fairly low density in urban terms – often around eight to ten dwellings per acre: as Crookston (2004) notes

'a tribute to lazy layouts, formulaic application of planning control and over-engineered roads, but is not particularly a result of big, generous house types, as anyone who lives in them will testify'. (p.251)

On the more positive side, this very low base offers plenty of scope for improvement in the delivery of higher densities in polycentric gradients that make much more sense in place making terms. To look at where we would need to start from on this, in a nicely illustrated and developed section of the paper, Crookston (2004, p.252) provides us with a review of the existing density scale in British cities; identifying thirty dwellings to the hectare suburbs delivered to a large extent in the interwar years; the Victorian and Edwardian inner city areas that provide thirty to forty-five dwellings per hectare; and the much higher density parts of traditional cities where a mix of medium rise terraces and flats bring densities up to 120 dwellings per hectare in some case (often, as he points out, in the most affluent areas). A critical point that Crookston (2004, p.253) makes here is that we must avoid 'the lure of numbers'. Density, Crookston (2004) argues, is an *outcome* of the place design process, not an input.

'We should not be designing to numbers; we should be designing for context and for a range of performance objectives, one of which will be intensity, another of which will be efficiency of land use (which can be expressed as a density figure).' (p.253)

Next, drawing on the *Urban Design Compendium* and a 2000 report, *Sustainable Residential Quality*, produced for London planners (for which Martin Crookston was one of the lead authors in both cases), Crookston uses the recent experience of London to explore how residential design can be successfully undertaken in ways that meet both density and renewal outcomes. This worked example offers a highly practical application of a context and walkability based approach, making use of the 'ped-shed', design rules of thumb and visual examples to help sort out development renewal opportunities (Crookston, 2004, p.253).

Among other points here Crookston (2004, p.253) acknowledges the influential 'transport oriented development' (TOD) approaches being pioneered by New Urbanists including Peter Calthorpe. Crookston points out that Calthorpe's TOD work relates to 'smart growth' approaches as seen in Portland, in the United States. These in turn sit within a New Urbanist design framework for place making. At the time Crookston was writing this piece there were (and remain) a number of US and

Australian-based practitioners publishing relevant work about shaping place making around sustainable transit, including Newman and Kenworthy (1999) exploring ways to overcome automobile dependency. It might also be worth noting that, broadly, Urban Design Compendium inflected approaches also had resonances with the contemporaneous urban village (Neal, 2003) and the traditional urbanism basis for design of places such as Poundbury (masterplanned by Leon Krier) in the United Kingdom.

As Martin Crookston (2004, p.254) points out there are local examples around the United Kingdom for urban designers and placemakers to draw upon, which 'can be found in *Better Places to Live*, the companion design guide published with Planning Policy Guidance Note PPG3'. Crookston (2004: 254) references places such as Crown Street in the Gorbals in Glasgow, and Kendal in the Lake District, and makes the point that 'the Victorian and Edwardian inner suburbs discussed earlier have much to teach us about the importance of 'streets not roads', the house/street relationship, and the importance of simple flexible grid layouts.' We do not have to be 'pushed into living like Italians or Catalans' (Crookston, 2004, 254) he argues, and in this he is responding by implication to a well worn trope that such higher density design is somehow foreign to 'Englishness'. As Crookston (2004) argues, rather

'There is much to learn from our own traditions and practice. However, we might take a look at modern German or Dutch practice, with issues and lifestyles much more like our own. A trip to Freiburg's Vauban or Rieselfeld shows good modern design creating civilised urban living, full of ideas and examples for say Manchester, Dublin or Dundee.' (p. 254)

Crookston (2004, p.255) also rightly explores some of the 'worries' about increasing densities; working through a series of areas where concerns have been flagged up – and showing how in some cases these anxieties have relatively little substance or can be dealt with through design excellence and good governance of place. Among these are anxieties about having closer neighbours (noise and overlooking etc.), about the kind of neighbours you might end up with, and parking. As he puts it: 'And then we have parking—the issue the English really, really care about' (Crookston, 2004, p.255). As Crookston (2004) maintains

'There are wider matters in play here, of course. The British have fewer cars, but use them more than their richer and better-organised neighbours to the east. They have a public transport system which is worse than it could or should be because of the obsession with driving down costs. Also, the priority to keeping traffic moving has made non-car options like walking and cycling less attractive than we want them to be. This all makes logical solutions harder to achieve.' (p.255)

In this review it is instructive to compare Crookston's analysis with the earlier review of the work of Sir James Drake where we can see at play the overriding concern with 'keeping traffic moving' as a basis for place shaping. By 2004 car based mobility is something that Martin Crookston shows needs to be balanced or even give way to

other contextual considerations about sustainability and resilience in place design. This insight is well represented, in my view, in the more holistic thinking encapsulated in policy guidance of the early 2000s identified in Crookston's paper. (Rather modestly Crookston does not dwell explicitly on the significant contribution his firm, Llewelyn Davies, made to the development of this design guidance at this time through *Better Places to Live-By Design*, the *Compendium*, and other documents).

Crookston only points out in a more general way that in 2004 the United Kingdom had some of the best guidance possible on place making - but policy makers and practitioners struggled to implement it. Today, in 2019, some fifteen years on, that guidance framework has been largely dismantled although some of us still make use of it in our teaching and practice in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. For example I have used the *Urban Design Compendium* working with students in Transylvania, Norway and the UK and it has been extremely helpful in a widely different range of settings.

There are also examples of individual good practice from (some) land developers and renewal specialists, which Crookston identifies in his paper: examples of excellence have not entirely disappeared with the removal of relevant guidance. I reported on some more recent UK experience which – broadly – reflects an urban renaissance approach to place making (Parham and Hulme, 2014). We know that a large body of collective urbanism knowledge from within the United Kingdom, around Europe and elsewhere still exists on which we can draw to inform practice today. Martin Crookston (2004) ends his paper by thinking about process though: with a plea to work together to deliver better places. He also makes the point that urban designers (like me) need to perhaps be a little more 'reflexive' given that

'Urban designers tend to complain sniffily that highway engineers need urban design training—but how many of them have actually read and internalised *Places, Streets & Movement*, for example?' (p.256)

Overall I consider this to be a really terrific paper which reports on a particular conundrum of delivering higher densities within a holistic place making approach which acts as a refutation of sprawl based, business-as-usual approaches to place. In so doing it explores a renaissance in design led guidance and place making advice in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As Crookston (2004) explains,

'The higher-density/urban renaissance agendas are bringing a lot of these issues to the fore because they are intensifying choices (and making them more difficult) in a way that the 'default setting' of the post-war decades did not.' (p.256)

The urban development and renewal choices Martin Crookston identifies in his 2004 paper, not only remain with us in 2019 but are sharpened by the climate emergency. This makes Martin Crookston's discussion of *The higher-density housing agenda and the 'urban renaissance'* even more timely now, when the case for resilient, well

designed housing and places should be of urgent interest to us all. In October 2019 the UK government published a *National Design Guide* – offering ‘planning practice guidance for beautiful, enduring and successful places’. I hope that is a sign the tide is turning toward highly applied design guidance once again.

References

Clos, J. (2005) ‘Towards a European City Model’ in *London: Europe’s Global City*. London. LSE Urban Age Available from http://v0.urban-age.net/0_downloads/LondonNewspaper.pdf [Accessed 18th November 2019]

Crookston, M. (2004) ‘The higher-density housing agenda and the ‘urban renaissance’’, *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers, Municipal Engineer* 157(ME4), pp251–256

Crookston, M. (2004) *Garden Suburbs of Tomorrow? A New Future for the Cottage Estates*. London. New York. Routledge

Hall, P. (2008) ‘Comment on historical ICE paper’. *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers, Urban Design and Planning* 161(DP1) pp23–26
doi: 10.1680/udap.2008.161.1.23

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) *National Design Guide. Planning practice guidance for beautiful, enduring and successful places*. Available from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/843468/National_Design_Guide.pdf [Accessed 18 November, 2019]

Neal, Peter (ed.) (2003) *Urban villages and the making of communities*. London; New York: Spon Press, an imprint of Taylor & Francis

Newman, Peter & Kenworthy, Jeffrey R (1999) *Sustainability and cities: overcoming automobile dependence*. Washington D.C. Island Press

Parham, S. & Hulme, J. (2014) *Hertfordshire Guide to Growth: Five Years On* Hatfield: UH Press. Available at [http://researchprofiles.herts.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/hertfordshire-guide-to-growth\(c6b01e46-8f4a-499d-a538-5d0a4e61ab73\).html](http://researchprofiles.herts.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/hertfordshire-guide-to-growth(c6b01e46-8f4a-499d-a538-5d0a4e61ab73).html) [Accessed 18th November 2019]