Briefing: Making massive small change

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‘The old delivery models are broken’ according to Sir Bob Kerslake of the UK Homes and Communities Agency. But are these models dead or just sleeping? Some would be inclined to blame the current recession for breaking the models. ‘It will all get better,’ they say, ‘when confidence returns.’ Others would say the models were broken long before the recession. Did society really get it right before or was it just flogging a dead horse? Like many recently failed UK high-street chains, you would say that the recession did not kill the business, it merely buried it. So is this a time to reflect and change approaches or is a paradigm shift upon us, whether welcome or not?

1. PRODUCT AS OPPOSED TO PLACE
Einstein’s famous quote – ‘Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again... expecting different results’ – seems real now. Most large masterplans in the UK have not delivered. Despite urban design being at the forefront of the current agenda in recent decades, the number of successful implantations can probably be counted on one hand. The reason is simple – an attempt has been made to replace the role of the public sector with the private sector. The private sector can deliver successful product but struggles to deliver successful places. That can only be the role of those who have a long-term view of a place. Horizons are too far for the private sector unless they are operating as a ‘quasi-estate’. The public sector is expecting the private sector to deliver projects that are too big, too intertwined and often too self-centred – the ‘single saviour’ approach. This will get the public sector off the hook and solve all the problems of a place. Wrong. Otherwise, why would projects like Elephant and Castle in London still be struggling after all these years, kept alive on the defibrillator of hope and expectation? Only the public sector can deliver a project of this scale by becoming the ‘single saviour’. This is where most schemes falter. Large sites need to be broken down into problem hills or, better still, many problem solutions. They all have single formulaic offers, all with a single saviour. They are like large problem mountains that only become resolved when the climb has reached the apex. The problem is, you still need the energy to get down from the top and this is where most schemes falter. Large sites need to be broken down into problem hills or, better still, many problem bungs. However, many developers like keeping their options open and one scheme merely replaces another as ownership, markets and competition force change. Why else has Kings Cross had so many masterplans?

2. THE FAILURE OF DESIGN
So, if delivery models have failed, has success in design been any better? Consider three cases – the sustainable urban extension, the inner-city neighbourhood renewal project and the high-density mixed-use precinct – all expounded as urban design successes in recent years. All are examples of large-scale masterplans but what have they really achieved?

Most sustainable urban extensions are merely by-pass infill based on a spurious notion of a walkable neighbourhood but with nothing meaningful to walk to. They are often merely reworkings of old design models but with ‘axes’. They desperately cling on to existing settlements like a baby monkey on its mother’s back rather than rooting themselves into the urban fabric. For the private sector, dealing with the adjacent community is just too difficult. Places revert to being archipelagos of suburbia, justified on environmental grounds, but still just propagating sprawl, albeit at a higher density than previously built. This is hardly sustainable!

Park Central in Birmingham is a much applauded inner-city renewal scheme, reaping numerous awards in recent years. It would tick every box in urban design best practice. It is well designed and executed. But it is also devoid of soul. Moves to even higher densities, seen as the prerequisite for urban life, have also failed. This is a pattern in many recent developments. In return, what is there is superficial and transient, nothing like the qualities in successful urban places that are valued.

Despite employing the best designers, having all the right conditions to deliver design quality and being supported by good clients, many large-scale masterplans have failed to achieve urbanity – surely the only real measure of success. High-density design has not delivered what was expected.

All these examples at different scales have common denominators. They all have single formulaic offers, all with a single hand and all delivered by means of a single approach. All start with a large site and move straight to the scheme with nothing in between. They are like large problem mountains that only become resolved when the climb has reached the apex. The problem is, you still need the energy to get down from the top and this is where most schemes falter. Large sites need to be broken down into problem hills or, better still, many problem bungs. However, many developers like keeping their options open and one scheme merely replaces another as ownership, markets and competition force change. Why else has Kings Cross had so many masterplans?

3. THE BIG PICTURE
Large sites, as a consequence of their size, hold cities and towns to ransom by their inaction and by the latent demand they suck out of the system, either real or by their promise. In other words, ‘I won’t invest because there is something bigger down the road.
that will threaten my investment’. Large sites should not, however, be confused with ‘big pictures’. Every place needs a big picture to guide its future growth and change, but big pictures need big walls. Successful cities and towns create the ‘galleries’ for these big pictures – their own city or town plans.

Big pictures can take two forms. The first is the big splashes on a canvas: a Pollock or a Calder. It lives when the splash is made and then subsides. Some call it ‘big’ architecture – the iconic masterplan or perfect building that will save us – also called the quick fix or the ‘wow factor’.

The second type of big picture is the million dabs on a canvas. Nobody can deny that Monet’s series of water lily paintings are great big pictures. They are the result of an infinite number of transactions on the canvas. This type of big picture resists the temptation for ‘wow’. It is invested with a stronger relationship with its viewer, who has to step back to discover the bigger picture, in what, at close range, looks only like unrelated coloured dots. It is not iconic, it is a masterpiece! Urban designers need to create the conditions for the ‘million dabs’.

4. LIMITED CHOICE = INFINITE POSSIBILITIES
Are flexibility and choice the two most dangerous words in place making? Barry Schwartz makes some interesting observations in his book *The Paradox of Choice* (Schwartz, 2003). As choice increases, the exercising of choice diminishes and with this comes the fear of choice. In other words, has one made the right choice? Schwartz likens this to buying an insurance policy. As insurance companies offered more choice of complex products, prospective customers delayed making any choice for fear that they would make the wrong decision. As choice increased, take-up reduced. Absolute choice was therefore no choice.

What is really sought is limited choice with infinite possibilities – like a well-cooked meal that can be flavoured! In urban terms this is what society has always done. Some call it vernacular; others refer to it as the prevailing norm: the rules in which urbanism can flourish at every level.

5. THE LOST ART OF SUBDIVISION
All vernacular starts with a plot and its relationship with buildings and streets – something that was achieved very well in the past. Many successful models hinged on the narrow fronted plot, with frontage dimension becoming the key indicator of wealth and social standing. Booth’s Plan of London is a map of plot frontages – the narrower the plot frontage, the lower the pecking order (Booth, 1899).

The plot is the smallest unit of mixed use and also the smallest – and therefore the most achievable – unit of delivery. It provides an opportunity for independent timelines and introduces the possibility for individual responses – the preconditions for richness, variety and uniqueness. The plot only comes about through ‘subdivision’ or the breaking up of the problem mountain into pebbles – an art that has been lost. The plot and building relationship has always been interdependent, but subdivision needs to be rediscovered alongside the development of new building typologies. In Spain they call it an ‘urbanizacion’, in the new world, a township plan. Rather than dealing with abstract design codes, the first point of departure in any planning process should be a version of a plot plan.

![Figure 1: Scotswood masterplan – detailed design of six blocks](image)
6. XS, S, M, L, XL
What is now needed is an upside down version of the big architecture approach propagated in the last decade. This has been the underlying fault in many masterplans in recent years – the hit and miss of the wow factor. Many of these have forced the architecture rather than facilitating it – plans that are too predetermined to produce single outcomes rather than offering individual responses. The fault of the masterplanner lies in not understanding the absolute need for complexity and an obsession with making the plan look ‘interesting’. In the world of ‘form follows function’, if the building does not work the masterplan needs to be reworked.

A new way of defining and regulating new development is required: something that focuses on the extra-small as the essential building block for our cities and towns. It is the cumulative effect of many ‘extra-smalls’ that will deliver the qualities society wants from a place – the million dabs on the canvas, the fine grain. This does not mean that everything needs to be small, but larger things should start from a consolidation of the small, always enabling the position to be reversed. In other words, once one has a plot one can combine this into a lot, a block or a phase of development, but one can always go back to the plot. It is against the grain of the collective small that the special buildings can be reflected.

7. BAR-CODE VERSUS DNA URBANISM
There are examples of new ‘fine-grain’ development and two examples spring to mind – Borneo Sporenburg in Amsterdam and Tutti Frutti in Manchester. The former plays to a ‘bar-code’ urbanism, which is pre-programmed and therefore forced. In other words, it is pretend variety made for the purposes of looking interesting. The second is more responsive as it looks to richness and variety derived from the individual commissioning of design. However, society needs to go further.

What is needed is a DNA approach to achieving variety. This is the result of small and subtle shifts that are perfected over time and allow small individual responses. This is the way that conservation areas are treated and it raises the prospect of a contemporary vernacular that meets the needs of society. Urban Initiatives’ work on the London Housing Design Guide (2009) raised the need to look for a London vernacular – something that many European design approaches still favour, something that could evolve over time, something that is additive. Group 91’s work in Making of the Modern Street in Dublin shows how collective architecture can lead to the development of something unique for a place.

8. LEARNING FROM SCOTSWOOD AND THE AYLESBURY ESTATE
The Scotswood housing expo in Newcastle first raised the possibility of looking at the reinvention of the popular house, something based on the street–plot–block–building relationship. This is now moving forward to implementation, a key ingredient being the fine-grain approach to design and delivery (Figures 1 and 2).

Urban Initiatives’ work on the Aylesbury estate in south London (Figure 3) shows that work can begin with the plot. The entire plan, for some 4000 new homes and infrastructure, starts with the principle of making a ‘long-life loose fit’ neighbourhood. It is capable of being subdivided into plots of say, 400 m². These can be assembled into lots or phases. The architectural team was challenged to come up with new building typologies and this has resulted in the makings of a viable response to the Mayor’s housing design guide. The area action plan has passed the tests of soundness and Southwark will formally adopt the plan in early 2010.

All urban design and planning professionals need to challenge
the status quo. They have become content with it and this is not good enough. Scotswood and the Aylesbury estate are a start. The debate now needs to begin on how to re-establish a fine-grain block pattern in cities to bring the million dabs to life.

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Urban Initiatives is an award-winning urban design practice working at the forefront of the current urban agenda.

REFERENCES

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