

review of

Duncan Bowie, *Politics, Planning and Homes in a World City*, Routledge, paperback isbn 978-0-415-48637-8 £30 max (also available as hardback £95) appearing in

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Britain has led the world in handing over power to market forces in almost every sphere of life. The transformation of society unleashed here by the IMF in the late '70s and by Thatcher in the '80s has now been unfolding for 3 decades and some of the most severe effects have arisen in the housing field as yet another generation makes the painful discovery that market relationships do not meet society's housing needs. No surprise that housing is the central issue in urban planning.

This is especially so in London and surrounding regions where the contradictions are at their worst: the low-wage populations needed in a global city can't afford the market rents, council tenants are squeezed as stock is privatised and maintenance postponed; over-crowding intensifies in public and private sectors, employers have trouble recruiting and retaining staff because housing costs are so high; construction output fails to respond to booming demand...

In former times these problems were solved, or at least made tolerable, by good regional and local planning and managed supplies of cheap building land and social housing. Now, however, the convention is to regard planning as the scapegoat or whipping boy for all our problems. If only planning were less restrictive, the market would respond by switching to mass production and delivering affordable housing for all — we are told. Who would be a planner in these conditions, let alone a housing specialist?

Duncan Bowie was already an experienced housing and planning professional when he joined the Mayor's planning team at the new Greater London Authority in 2000 and he stuck it out until 2008, taking responsibility for housing within the London Plan in both of Ken Livingstone's 4-year terms of office.

This book is a highly expert account of the successive versions of the London Plan and of many of the power struggles behind the scenes

The book is that rare thing, an insider's narrative of a process of plan-making. A small team with a very clear policy line from Ken Livingstone and his political advisors produced an innovative plan and revised it twice, all within eight years. The story is told in detail and will be of intense interest to professionals, academics, campaigners and tenants.

The central thread of the book is the struggle to reverse the decline in the stock of social rental housing in London to catch up with a backlog of needs and to keep pace with the growth of a population, half of whom could not expect to become owner-occupiers or rent an adequate flat in the inflated private market. All this was supposed to be done without infringing on the sacred Green Belt and

without the Mayor having any direct power or money to undertake actual housing construction. Furthermore all the authorities involved were refusing to confront the relationship between Greater London (roughly the area inside the M25) and the surrounding counties which provide housing for a third of the labour force.

The production of social rented housing (and also of some 'intermediate' housing aimed at a middle-income band) was thus going to be achieved by increasing densities while requiring private developers to contribute space and resources for affordable housing out of the abnormal profits they would otherwise have been making. In fact, the book shows, that these deals with developers (under Section 106 of the Planning Act) did contribute to the provision of social housing, mainly through making sites available. But the government subsidy remained essential, in all but 20% of projects, and one of the main reasons why the Plan targets for social housing were never achieved was the inadequacy of government expenditure.

The book is especially valuable in presenting detailed analysis of the economics of 40 major housing development projects, exploring the relationships between density, land prices, dwelling size and mix, tenure and subsidy.

One of the important findings is that many important qualitative objectives tended to be sacrificed in pursuit of targets for simple numbers of affordable housing units: open space for children and for general use, room sizes and the severe shortages of dwellings for large households. It is a very detailed demonstration of how, in the British planning system, even the firmest policy commitments can be sacrificed to considerations of 'viability' and 'other material considerations'.

There are lots of things this book does not attempt to deal with, notably the great successes of the Livingstone administration in reversing the decline of London public transport and implementing the congestion charge as a key part of that strategy. That probably needs another book.

This book is a critical evaluation of the housing achievements and failures of the Ken Livingstone regime within its Faustian pact with City financial and property interests. The market never was going to meet social needs, but heroic and sophisticated efforts were made to harness the speculative boom and the achievements were substantial. Do read it.

Michael Edwards, Bartlett School of Planning, UCL