

Sacred cow or sacrificial lamb? Will the green belt have to go?

Reprint from *CITY* 4(1) 2000: 105-112

London confronts a peculiarly modern crisis: its green belt may have to be sacrificed, either on the high altar of 'competitiveness' or to put substance in the campaign against 'social exclusion'. The two motives could be combined powerfully: the first gains support from the right, the second from the left.

If this were to happen we would be sacrificing the greatest tangible achievement of post-war social-democratic planning to the pressures of neo-liberalism. This short article presents a short account and interpretation of what has taken place and reflects upon possible ways forward.¹

Why should this bit of local action be of any global interest? Perhaps for a number of reasons. At a relatively abstract and methodological level, this analysis is part of an international literature seeking to relate international processes (where the word 'global' is much used) with the dynamics of change within individual cities and localities, and the article refers to some of that material. At another level British town and country planning has been enormously influential in the world, notably but not exclusively in Britain's ex-colonies. It is a set of practices which often transplants badly in space. In this article I am arguing that aspects of British planning transplant badly in time.

For the writer, this conundrum is most important as an instance of a very important class of problem: reforms introduced for progressive, modern, motives, or secured through class struggle, end up being converted into marketable commodities and operating as barriers to social and economic development or as regressive elements in the spatial structure. A regional settlement pattern which was broadly efficient and equitable 25 years ago has become a burden on capital, oppressive for labour and not very 'green' either. In the words of Marcuse and van Kempen this "... is because spatial patterns are brought about by processes that are not simply spatial" (Marcuse and van Kempen, 2000). Similar stories could be told about other achievements of urban planning: conservation areas, social housing in rich neighbourhoods, public parks or new town design (Edwards 2000a in press, Edwards, 2000b in press).

¹ A substantial research programme would be needed to validate and detail

The origins

The idea of containing the growth of the metropolis goes back to at least Queen Elizabeth I and started to approach acceptability in the work of Ebenezer Howard a century ago (Howard, 1898 #690). It began to be implemented between the Wars when the London County Council purchased land in the periphery and was then embodied in the County of London Plan and Greater London Plan prepared during World War II. Since then there has been no looking back. The continuous built-up area of London still stops where it did in 1939, giving way to 'countryside' of varying quality: sumptuous farms and forests in some directions, scrubby and unloved elsewhere. In some places the green belt contains large public or private institutions in extensive grounds, golf clubs and other recreational spaces. But for the most part it is still used for agriculture. The green belt (and countryside protection policies beyond it) provides the setting for towns, villages and isolated houses for 100 km or more around London.

The story

The green belt was supposed to secure recreation and breathing space for Londoners and its counterpart was the system of New Towns, and later of Expanding Towns in the rest of the region, to which 'overspill' of households and of industries would be 'exported'. The combined system operated very effectively for decades (Hall, Gracey et al. 1973) and the general philosophy of containment of urbanisation came to be the dominant theme in county planning in most of the rest of the region. The older towns in the region employed many of their own residents while the new and expanded towns initially operated as even more self-contained labour markets², providing good homes by and large for the Fordist industries growing in the 50s and 60s and for their workers. The proximity of countryside seems to have been much valued, as was the prevailing suburban form of housing with gardens. In retrospect it was important that economic growth pressures were distributed among UK regions with the help of variable systems of carrots and sticks. While the South East and adjoining areas were always the fastest growing, the growth never quite got out of hand until well into the 80s.

This regional system provided a set of conditions in which the growing class stratification of the society could settle itself into specific settings - neighbourhoods, towns, landscapes - without being very visible. With the

growth of car ownership and use, and as the division of labour became ever more elaborate, many of the richer and more mobile moved to villages and farm houses or took jobs in other towns. While some of the region's settlements are on good radial railways to London, public transport in other directions is normally weak so we have witnessed explosive growth in the number and length of car trips as the region becomes more like a single entity, a linked set of origins and destinations kept apart by the precious countryside. The congestion, pollution and noise problems are quite severe in many places.

For all its negative features, however, this system is hotly defended in a consensus which has, until recently, been almost unanimous: the towns and counties unite to resist population growth, new building, 'urban sprawl', the coalescence of distinct settlements and any other change which threatens the precious setting. The case for containment could also be buttressed by reference to the need for food production and thus for the protection of agricultural land, though now that subsidies are being paid to farmers for 'set-aside' this argument has lost its currency - if not its underlying force.³

Major contradiction

The great contradiction, however, has arisen in the 1980s and '90s when, through a combination of probable causes, the demands for space in the region, especially in London, grew steady faster than the (contained) supply. The story is this:

(i) In common with all cities, London has had the basic problem of inadequate land supply in good accessible locations. This is amplified by the substantial inflow of migrants, mainly from the rest of Europe under the free movement provisions of the EU, a migration disproportionately impacting in inner London (Mogridge, 2000).

(ii) Combined with real growth of incomes from earnings, profits and rents for perhaps half the population, and through the income elasticity of demand for housing, this creates a tendency towards relative price inflation in our

³ The late Gerald Wibberley used to claim that food production was often higher in suburban gardens than in the fields they replaced, but the crude

region. By the same logic it increases the volatility of prices: supply is so inflexible that demand fluctuations are largely absorbed by price changes.

(iii) combined further with relative (and perhaps absolute) impoverishment of a large part of the population, the market price rent of housing excludes a growing proportion of the population or forces them into less space.

(iv) there is a powerful distortion whereby actual investment in new construction, repair and maintenance is lower than it would be in conditions of easier land supply - i.e. where there was less barrier to capital. For example

- This is the familiar experience that you pay so much to service your mortgage that you can't afford to maintain or extend the dwelling, and
- Developers spend so much on sites that they skimp on floorspace, garden space and quality. Cullen (Cullen 1982) and the early work of Ball (Ball 1983) was very effective in explaining the configuration of social forces which generated this characteristic form of speculative housing. This very low standard of development may nowadays gain some legitimacy where it is built at high density but in most cases any 'sustainability' benefits must be outweighed by the car-dependency of these developments and their sheer low quality.

(v) Structurally, at the regional scale it means our regional decentralisation has been over long distances to towns (or non-town locations) where car-dependence within and between settlements is strong (Ota 1995).

(vi) Within the towns, especially London, this mechanism produces pressure for densification of suburbs and infilling everywhere - often at the expense of the use-values enjoyed by established residents. This is politically very tense, and the contradictions emerge in the work of GOL, LPAC and the Boroughs. Larger-scale intensification of use is blocked by fissiparous owner-occupation and ideological objections to the use of compulsory purchase powers by the state.

(vii) So far as the house building industry is concerned, this configuration of forces helps to explain the declining role of the volume speculative house builders in generating substantial additions to supply. They cannot gain access to good large sites and the ones they can find are expensive (because of

the cost of outbidding other users) or have decontamination costs which the state will not always shoulder.

(viii) For the housing association sector (now our only source of new social housing) the combination of high land costs, falling government grants and rising proportions of open market borrowing mean that

- space and quality standards are under intense pressure
- rents have to be high and rising
- only Housing Benefit underwrites the market risk for lenders - a weird paradox
- You can afford a housing association dwelling only if you are prosperous enough, or if you are poor enough to get benefit. This is a problem for occupiers, for those excluded, for management and for the social composition of schemes.

(ix) As the London property market has become slightly more 'perfect', and as privatisation of public services is implemented, there is a tendency for 'low-value' activities to be extruded from many locations, especially in the centre of London - and especially in boom periods when organisations may be particularly keen to cash in their site values or reluctant to accept revised rents. This can threaten to displace activities (museums, charities, educational bodies and idiosyncratic businesses) which generated the positive externalities around which normal businesses clustered. The effects are visible in many places - most recently in the arrival of Marks and Spencer in Covent Garden.

What is the politics of all this? Clearly it is not simply a landed class in the 19th century sense; nor simply a conspiracy or cartel of property owners. As usual it is a peculiar phenomenon based on some real material interests and some misunderstandings. What we have is this grotesque consensus between the country landowners and the Council for the Protection of Rural England, allied with green groups including even quite radical greens, and of course the formal political parties all lined up in an un-thinking unison.

Early cracks began to appear in the consensus when, a decade ago, the Department of Trade and Industry objected to the Berkshire County Structure Plan on the grounds that restraint policies were responsible for such severe housing shortages that the important aerospace and military-related

industries south west of London were having problems recruiting and retaining staff. A decade later the Inquiry into the proposed government regional guidance for the south east has brought the conflict to the surface more explicitly. Today's debate is officially conducted in terms which mystify the real problem since it deals with target numbers of dwellings without reference to prices and rents: the struggle over living costs is sanitised as a discussion of demography. Alongside that debate is a related one about the benefits of an urban 'renaissance' based upon mixed use and higher density urban redevelopment (Urban Task Force 1999) .

Interestingly some gaps are now appearing in the political consensus in the run-up to the Mayoral elections. London business interests are beginning to voice concerns over whether the green belt and containment policies are sustainable because of the effects - now widely appreciated - of the supply constraints on labour costs and thus on 'competitiveness'. We have yet to see much questioning of the green belt in printed documents: it tends to be floated as an aside in the unscripted remarks of business leaders.

Interpretation

This narrative is open to a variety of interpretations. Within a framework essentially of neo-classical welfare economics, Evans, during the last boom, presented a lucid account of the inefficiencies and welfare dis-benefits of containment (Evans 1987; Evans 1988) and Cheshire offered a similar account for the town of Reading (Cheshire, Sheppard et al. 1985; Cheshire and Sheppard 1995) .

From a Marxist point of view we could offer an alternative account of the situation. A lot of 'rent' is being collected. Some is differential rent - representing the surplus profits which accrue from buildings in locations where very large amounts of capital have been invested (by building owners, adjoining owners and state investment in infrastructure⁴). Another

⁴ Strictly this is the form of rent which Ball calls differential rent 'mark 2', especially important where massive concentrations of social and private

contributory form of rent comes from the region-wide exclusion of investment in property development: because investors cannot invest freely, open competition does not drive their profits down to normal levels and the

(Ball

resulting abnormal surpluses are creamed off as rent or land value⁵. Truly massive transfers of income and wealth thus take place, the inequality of

⁵ This is the form of rent which is termed 'absolute' rent by Marx

(Marx 1894 and later

living and working conditions is exacerbated, technologies we need for housing and transport are never developed or optimised and moves towards real environmental sustainability are ruled out of consideration. The potentiality for the planning and architectural professions to innovate are equally frustrated.

What we lack, curiously, is any serious analysis of the problems of our city and region in these terms. The contrast is particularly strong with Paris

of the coal industry

(Fine

(Preteceille, Pinçon-Charlot et al. 1986; Lipietz 1995) and with Frankfurt (Keil and Ronneberger 2000) .⁶

In terms of class politics the outcome is far from clear: there is absolutely no general appreciation of the real consequences of the containment policy. Many Londoners and a majority of people in the rest of the region are anyway owner-occupiers and tend to see the positive side of house price rises. Even within the green movement only a minority have noticed any of the real social and environmental penalties (Fairlie and This Land is Ours 1996) . Fairlie has pointed out that in much of southern England the poor and middle-earners are *prevented from getting housing but required to use cars*.

⁶ A fuller discussion of some of these issues will be published later this year

What should we do?

One crude response would be to campaign for some sort of abolition of the green belt. This would be suicide for any politician and an impossible campaign to mount. It would also miss the point. It would on the one hand stimulate creative measures by house building companies which own extensive land banks - and could acquire more - to restrict supply. It would also offer no guarantee of better quality housing or urban development in the areas released: the likelihood is that we would see a proliferation of low-grade car-dependent housing estates and business parks all round the M25 and as far as the eye could see. Land and building prices in the region might come down but at a very high environmental cost.

The alternative is to rally political support for a whole new approach which attacks the oppressive features of the contradictions through a serious new approach to regional policy and a major upwards shift in land supply as well. Then it would be necessary to try and get social scientists and designers to cooperate in developing schemes which would simultaneously

- add to housing and workplace supply
- get some of the alleged benefits of density (public transport, pedestrian activity, energy savings)
- avoid the downside - (rabbit hutches on postage stamps).
- if replicated at public transport nodal points across the region, would help to flood the land market and keep price expectations low.

This sort of strategy would be in the interests of most households and business users of space - though if they were owners as well it would adversely effect their prospective capital gains. These expectations are now rather low anyway so we have a window of opportunity. The house builders, for whom containment has been a mixed blessing, would probably get used to it as they could learn to rely less on development profits and more on construction profit. Like the campaign against the corn laws it would unite productive forces against the landed interest. But since the landed interest is now just another form of capital it would be an explicit pitting of some capitals against others.

In the urbanised area the immediate challenge is to find ways of greatly increasing the carrying capacity of the land while socialising the development

profits or using them to finance the infrastructure or social housing. One small movement in this direction is our work in proposing extensive public transport improvement between suburbs in London, with dense development for mixed functions at all the resulting nodes (Hall, Edwards et al. 1999; Edwards 2000c) .

In the 'countryside' there is an even greater challenge: to promote kinds of development, probably in linked chains and networks, which are aesthetically and ecologically tolerable: permaculture and other relatively self-sufficient forms of settlement (but not so self-sufficient that they don't contribute to relieving the region's pressures: those could as well be elsewhere). This is partly a design challenge: to produce forms of settlement and building which actually enrich the landscape, rather than 'spoiling' it. Had the concepts of countryside protection been in force, we would never have had Bath or Stroud, Edinburgh or New Lanark, Durham or Port Merion. Built environments can be rather good.

References

Ball, M (1985) 'The Urban Rent Question' *Environment and Planning A* **17**: 503-525

Ball, M J (1983) *Housing policy and economic power* London, Methuen

Cheshire, P and S Sheppard (1995) 'On the price of land and the value of amenities' *Economica* **62**: 247-67

Cheshire, P C, S Sheppard and A Hooper (1985) *The economic consequences of the British [land use] planning system: some empirical results* University of Reading

Cullen, A (1982) 'Speculative Housebuilding in Britain Some Notes on the switch to Timber-Frame Production Methods' *Proceedings of the Bartlett International Summer School on the Production of the Built Environment* **4**: 4/12 - 4/18

Edwards, M (2000a in press) 'Property markets and the production of inequality' in *The Blackwell Companion to the City* Eds. S. Watson and G. Bridge. Oxford, Blackwell

Edwards, M (2000b in press) 'City design: what went wrong at Milton Keynes?' submitted to *Journal of Urban Design*.

Edwards, M (2000c) 'Towards a joined-up London' *Planning in London* **32**(Jan-Mar): 41-42

Evans, A W (1987) *House prices & land prices in the S. E. - a review* London, House Builders' Federation

Evans, A W (1988) *No Room! No Room! Costs of the British planning system* London, Institute of Economic Affairs

Fairlie, S and This Land is Ours (1996) *Low Impact Development: planning and people in a sustainable countryside* Charlbury, Oxon, Jon Carpenter Publishing

Fine, B (1985) 'Land, Capital and the British Coal Industry prior to World War II' in *Land rent, housing and urban planning: a European perspective* Eds. M. J. Ball, V. Bentivegna, M. Edwards and M. Folin. London, Croom Helm, 107-126

Hall, P, M Edwards and D Robson (1999) *London's Spatial Economy: the dynamics of change* London, London Development Partnership (LDP) and Royal Town Planning Institute

Hall, P, H Gracey, R Drewett and R Thomas (1973) *The Containment of Urban England* London, Allen and Unwin

Howard, E (1898) *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, London

Keil, R and K Ronneberger (2000) 'The Globalisation of Frankfurt am Main: core, periphery and social conflict' in *Globalising Cities* Eds. P. Marcuse and R. van Kempen. Blackwell, 228-248

Lipietz, A (1995) 'Avoiding megapolization: the battle of Ile-de-France' *European Planning Studies* **3**(2): 143-154

Marcuse, P and R V Kempen, Eds. (2000) *Globalizing Cities: Is There a New Spatial Order?* Oxford, Blackwell

Mary, K (1894 and later editions) *Capital* ed. F. Engels

Mogridge, M (2000) 'London just keeps on growing' *Planning in London* 32(January): 7-9

Ota, M, 1995 *Office Decentralisation: London and Tokyo*, PhD Thesis, UCL, London

Preteceille, E, M Pinçon-Charlot and P Rendu (1986) *Ségrégation urbaine: classes sociales et équipements collectifs en région parisienne*, Paris, Anthropos

Urban Task Force (1999) *Towards an Urban Renaissance* London, Routledge