

Garden Cities

Peter Stewart

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The promoters of the 2014 Wolfson prize, for new ideas about garden cities – and the winners Urbed – deserve praise. But it has been criticism of the winning entry from the Government's housing and planning minister, Brandon Lewis, that has attracted most attention.

The episode is symptomatic of just how hard it is to promote large scale development in the UK that is underpinned by anything that looks like an idea or a proposition.

At the scale of individual buildings, it can be harder to gain planning approval for something interesting than for something mediocre. Keep below the radar, don't frighten the horses and you will stand a chance. Come up with a bold idea and you are likely to be in trouble. Sadly, the same applies to solving the country's housing crisis. Most of the new housing built by the volume house builders is dire, but as it's the same all over the country, it's hard to find a convincing reason to resist any particular example, and schemes are waved through with little discussion about their quality.

The 'no ideas please, we're British' problem is not specific to garden cities – a similar reaction is likely to greet anyone who promotes a coherent, organised way of expanding a settlement – as opposed to just throwing up more boxes in whatever fields have been made available. Yet just as we will only have enough energy to meet our needs in future if we use a bit of everything available to us, so we would improve the chances of building new homes in the numbers needed, and providing a variety of solutions to what is not a uniform demand, if we welcomed specific, well-considered proposals – premiated by a well-informed judging panel – rather than indulging in grandstanding criticisms. 'Choice' is something the present administration promotes in health and education – but judging from the minister's reaction to the Urbed scheme, not in how new housing is brought forward – although his government's NPPF specifically calls for a 'wide choice' in housing provision, and says that large settlements including

garden cities may be part of the answer.

The Tories' line is that the days of the top-down, 'imposed' solution are over – with the likes of Urbed cast as the heirs of the amateur Ebenezer Howard or the statist technocrats of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation.

Holding on to the rhetoric of localism, the minister wants to see instead the bottom-up, locally generated plans that were meant to emerge from neighbourhood planning. Schemes promoted by local people do exist, but they are rare, and typically involve small numbers of homes – of little use in meeting the nationwide need. The bulk of what actually gets built has nothing at all to do with localism. What Urbed offer, characterised by Lewis as sprawl, is in fact specifically conceived as an alternative to the sprawl that is happening everywhere now.

The timeframes of big projects are a problem for politicians. Lewis has a small majority in one of UKIP's top target seats, and there's a general election next spring. Objections to any big proposals typically arrive before there is even a scheme to object to, and the benefits of big ideas such as Urbed's wouldn't materialise for a decade at least.

Meanwhile the planning system churns out dreary documents that no one reads in the name of 'managing development'. There is no appetite, and few mechanisms, for the public sector to put forward big, positive, sophisticated propositions such as Rudlin's. The private sector, also plagued by short-termism, has learnt that doing the same thing as last time is best for this year's balance sheet.

A constant stream of UK practitioners undertake study tours to admire exemplar developments such as Hammarby Sjöstad in Sweden or Vauban in Germany, and return depressed at our inability to match what is done in such places – not because of lack of talent, but because of stultifying institutional and administrative arrangements.

The brief for the Wolfson prize was "How would you deliver a new Garden City which is visionary, economically viable, and popular?". The first part of my answer would be: go abroad.