

Time to return to the new town

Peter Stewart

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Why is it that, in spite of all the current interest in urbanism and place-making, we are continuing to build so much of our housing in the form of commuter suburbs? Isn't there room in the Sustainable Communities Plan for us to build a new town or two? Come to that, isn't a town quite a good working definition of a sustainable community?

A great deal of new housing is going to be built on green fields in the south east over the next few decades, even if the most optimistic targets for building on brownfield land are met. As things stand, it is hard to be optimistic about the chances of us getting much more than a collection of humdrum dormitory extensions to some rather unexciting places. Very little of the housing will benefit from the richness of design talent that we have in this country.

Why not take advantage of that talent by getting some of our best urbanists and architects to collaborate on a design for a new town that shows what twenty-first century European urbanism could be?

Forty years after Milton Keynes, many of the planning orthodoxies that underpinned it and other new towns have been turned on their heads. Most importantly, the destructive effects of planning for cars before people have been recognised.

Today, there is as much interest in what cities should be like as in what buildings should be like, and a surprising amount of consensus, but little chance in this country to put ideas about urbanism into practice on a serious scale. The new orthodoxies about compact walkable mixed-use neighbourhoods are difficult to implement on brownfield infill sites. A new town or city could be a crucible or test bed for us to show our best designers making

urbanism and architecture - and traffic - work together.

It would be fascinating to see what the likes of, let's say, Richard Rogers or Leon Krier would make of the opportunity to design a new town (Poundbury is a suburb). The ideas that they and others express about what makes good urbanism are nothing like any existing 'new town'. They admire the form of the historic European city. What would their reinterpretation of that, in the Thames Gateway, look like?

Steady, you say. The UK New Towns were the last gasp of a top-down tradition of experimenting on the poor by means of well-intentioned social improvement schemes. Further new towns are not on the agenda.

But in fact, some are emerging by default. At Ebbsfleet in Kent, a new international station will open in two years' time, with a 15 minute journey time to St Pancras. Five minutes away, there is a regional shopping centre at Bluewater. Unsurprisingly, a lot of new development is proposed in the area: homes, offices, some manufacturing.

A station, shops, homes, offices, factories. Hang on, isn't that what towns are made of? Yet disappointingly, what is proposed shows every sign of adding up to a lot less than the sum of its parts. It will be 'development', but it won't have much chance of becoming a real place.

I think it's time to rewind and start again. After a rigorous OJEC process, put Richard Rogers, Leon Krier and Piers Gough in a room together to design a new town - or let's call it a city. Make them admit that they share many ideas about what makes a good city (apart from the architecture). Get them to collaborate on a masterplan vision which sorts out important principles (apart from the architecture). Allocate projects to some of the talented young practices that struggle to land anything much beyond a back extension or a boutique.

If it's all too late for the mainly brownfield land around Ebbsfleet, as I fear it is, find a greenfield site instead. In the long term, as Ebenezer Howard worked out a long time ago, building new towns on green fields makes money for those who benefit from the increase in land value generated (as opposed to costing millions in remediating polluted sites that it would be cheaper to turn into much-needed parkland) - as well as creating 'sustainable communities'.

The Government should find a promising site in the south east (it doesn't have to be in the Thames Gateway), ignore the CPRE and the county council for once, and build a new town. If we got on with it, there could be something to see by the time the world's eyes are on the Thames Gateway in 2012.