



# Under the microscope

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## Regeneration Replay

With the rise in power and status of the Regional Development Agencies and the associated welter of public money flowing into the system, there has been a fast and furious increase in the number of town and city masterplan commissions. Masterplans for city centres, for coastal strips, for industrial wastelands and historic dockyards. The large architectural and masterplanning practices are once again the big swinging dicks of the regeneration world. The masters of the universe. Our language and vocabulary resonates with the latest masterplan speak: arcs of opportunity, visioning exercises, ripple effects, communication corridors and the like.

The future of our country is being mapped out as a patchwork quilt of 'AO' plans and colour-coded layouts. Consultation abounds and investment opportunities waft warmly under the noses of developers and regeneration companies alike. The future is a heavenly nirvana of balanced communities, environmental sustainability and a mix of cultural and artistic activities that will advance our quality of life and catapult our appreciation of all things worthy to the top of any UN league table.

And of course it all seems so real. These exercises are being completed by thoughtful, able and experienced practitioners, partnering with the public sector community (be it officers, politicians or interest groups) for whom it means a great deal and for whom the quality of the future is a measure of success.

But somehow it just isn't realistic. It can't be. Our economy hasn't got the lungs to breathe life into each and every blueprint for the future. Our communities haven't the energy, motivation or even the wherewithal for such dramatic change. And, dare I

say it, the profession (sitting on both sides of the private/public sector table), hasn't got the capacity or long-term drive or commitment to see the bright images and new lifestyles delivered.

In a sense what is happening is an understandable investment in a vision for a new tomorrow. An investment that is often acknowledged as being a dreamy flight of fancy (not those exact words I hasten to add), but is justified on the grounds that there is

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an onus of responsibility on the part of the public agencies and authorities to promote enhancement and regeneration. To inspire. To lead. To raise aspirations and broaden horizons. And for once there is enough public money slushing around to appoint other people to help.

There is an important point here. The process of masterplanning is in itself a valid exercise. It allows the thinking to begin, the ideas to ferment and the levels of ambition to be measured against the realities of life. If nothing else masterplanning focuses the mind: it requires debate and discussion and the prioritisation of initiatives. In process terms it does all the right things.

So the trend continues. The tendency to commission large-scale masterplan studies is on the increase and seems to have been growing year on year since the inception of the RDAs. Whilst I don't question the drive for a new tomorrow, or the striving for economic growth and regeneration, what I do question is

whether or not resources are being used appropriately and whether, as taxpayers, we are getting value for money. In particular I question the broad thrust of these massive studies on three key grounds; realism, integration and follow-through.

If I had a pound for every study, plan or invitation to tender document that has included within it a wish-list that exclaims a desire to become 'the next Bilbao' or develop 'the next Eden' I would be a rich man.

Every town, city, sub-region and region wants to be not just a success, but a big success. And whilst this is admirable, it simply isn't realistic. Yet time after time I see masterplan visions that pander to this wish. Expansive road maps to Basque-style glory and Tim Smit-style fame for all and sundry. Life isn't like this and, more to the point, the market won't allow it.

And herein lies my first point. There needs to be more realism about the ability of our communities to deliver against targets. This demands that masterplanners develop a much keener understanding of the marketplace, of future trends and the realities of the funding and revenue context. The creation of a new 'must see' destination is all too often seen as a panacea. It isn't. Any 'big bang' destination costs millions of pounds to build, needs millions more to operate, and is equally likely to be a constant draw on the public sector purse as it is an economic engine.

I am currently working on a regeneration project in the north east where there has been much debate about the potential role of a large-scale leisure-led development to pump prime the regeneration and renewal process. This isn't the solution to an area that suffers from severe

deprivation and is riven from the success of the region. The solution in this case demands a more integrated and thoughtful approach. Thankfully, in this instance, the lead consultant has the capacity to deliver such an approach; many other studies are not so fortunate.

And this brings me to my second point: integration. More often than not masterplans and visions look and feel lovely. They are upbeat and cheery, characterised by hope and a sunny view of the future. Much more motown than heavy metal. But I question whether, in the majority of cases, they really relate to the places in which they are set. Do they fit within the reality of the industrial grime, Victorian neglect and residential squalor that typifies the majority of the study areas?

I would suggest that while many try they often fail. Too frequently the plans appear as if from nowhere and sit rather incongruously in the landscape. Awkward pieces of a mixed-up jigsaw, with edges that don't quite fit and interiors that fail to connect. It is commonplace to observe that in the search for the new future, a study will fail to make best use of the inherent strength of the existing, albeit somewhat downtrodden, sense of place. It is this character into which solutions should (must?) fit if they are to work over time. Equally, the wider hinterland must be given appropriate respect, especially in market terms. Sensible masterplanning isn't about the grasping 'me, me, me' economics of displacement but rather the sound, if somewhat slower burning, economics of additionality.

So, integration counts in many areas: in the close-grain nature of 'fit', within the wider context of the market and finally, in terms of the overlap of projects, studies and other initiatives.

My final anxiety is one relating to deliverability. Regeneration masterplanning is a long, drawn-out process. A war of attrition. Low on glamour, high on graft. Success at places like Salford and Cardiff bears this out. It goes without saying that a masterplan is only as good as the outputs that it produces: the proof really is in the pudding.

### Sensible masterplanning isn't about the grasping 'me, me, me' economics of displacement.

Whilst the public sector are well positioned for the long-term, the private sector has a vital partnering role to play. Regeneration demands the commitment of both public and private, but unfortunately both parties can have a tendency to change of heart and distraction. The public sector is all too often at risk of change caused by political expediency, whilst the private sector has an inclination to follow the market. In an ideal world the public / private partnership would be so wedded as to be completely symbiotic, leaving the politicians feeling confident about adhering to targets, and the investors and developers happily managing risk in an effort to create a market to support the overarching objectives. A virtuous spiral if ever there was one.

And of course, the theory is all fine, whilst the practice is always oh so different. Whilst I am certainly not advocating the cessation of masterplanning activities, I am making a call for a higher degree of focus, realism and connection. In effect, a greater degree of responsibility, particularly on the part of the masterplanning teams. Masterplans should not be academic exercises

dislocated from the real world, simply replaying old tunes to new audiences. Masterplanning for regeneration-led development should be about delivering bespoke, sustainable mixed-use communities, rather than tee-ing up opportunities for voracious private sector asset strippers with little or no long-term interest in an area. With a greater degree of thought about the future, connection with the market and commitment to delivery, the impact of the masterplanning process could be significantly enhanced. Not only would the exercise enable the participants to benefit from the thinking process, but to engage with the implementation and delivery. The moment this Rubicon is passed everyone begins to win.

We should try and say goodbye to the beautiful, bright, over-ambitious plans that promise Edenesque levels of visitor throughput, economic regeneration and profile building that are almost certainly beyond the reach of all but the very, very few (that is, after all, why such projects are so special). The accent should be less on the fantasy and more on the reality: understanding what is achievable, what investments are worth making, and where value is most likely to be created.

And with more realistic targets to hand, the difficult, fatiguing and time-consuming process of implementation becomes a rewarding and meaningful endeavour. This has simply got to make sense: there is, after all, only so long we can expect people to keep chasing the treasure at the end of a rainbow.

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