

# Sustainable Destinations

## How is sustainability being used to brand large mixed-use destinations?

Sustainability is now a key brand of many new destinations, especially in the residential sector. In *How is Sustainability Being Used to Brand Large Mixed-use Destinations?*, Locum asked Mike Roberts, Managing Director of Vertigo Sustainable Development Consultancy and consultant to Colliers CRE, to lend his experience. Mike also canvassed the opinions from three thought leaders in the industry: Alistair Sawday, travel publisher and author, Kevin McCloud, HAB, television presenter and author, and Richard Powell, Director of transformational developer First Base.

### Introduction

As all products and places compete in an evermore crowded market place, the need for well-defined differentiation grows forever stronger. In recent years, two major trends have emerged that have the potential to combine into a powerful distinguishing force when applied correctly to any destination - branding and sustainability.

Firstly, sustainability continues to rise into the mainstream as a key development goal, entwining the definition of financial success with environmental and social consideration. As government, the private sector and the media mobilise to adopt this essential mentality (some faster than others!) sustainable best practice can, and is, lending competitive advantage to new developments.

Secondly, as discussed elsewhere in this issue of the Locum Destination Review, adopting branding into the core of a development strategy will crystallise the promised experience of the planned destination. Through the process of defining the brand, a clear understanding of target markets and the market positioning of a product is achieved that lays the foundations for a successful destination. Strategic branding allows you to know your end users, understand their desires and deliver what the market wants.

However, the question here is how are these two factors being combined in new, large-scale mixed-use developments? How is sustainability being used to brand them?





## Mixed-use and sustainability

As we sit down to a pot of tea, **Mike** immediately explains how mixing uses is by its very nature a sustainable approach.

"If we can live, work and play in a single place our need to travel is greatly reduced and a big chunk of our carbon footprint can be reduced. But how many people live and work within the same development? In the past 5-10 years the majority of urban residential has been 1-2 bedroom units, so it might cater for singles and couples, but people with families are generally given no option to combine those live and work parts of our hectic lifestyles. It appears that the gauntlet of creating family friendly, high density developments has yet to be picked up by many of our urban developers. With the over-supply of small apartments being thrown into stark relief by the credit crisis, perhaps some developers may be inspired (or forced) to change their approach."

He continues by pointing out how different activities also bring further advantages for sustainable living.

"Infrastructure can work better with a range of different uses. For example, combined heat and power systems can work to a much greater efficiency level with different load requirements at different times of day. However, with buildings becoming better insulated, the surplus heat generated is a major issue. Perhaps our developers can be really bold and use the heat to extend the growing season within the rooftop greenhouses.

Less technically complex, but an increasingly important part of sustainable infrastructure, is the car club. Again, different uses throw up different requirements for car use and can make car clubs more efficient. To date car clubs have only been deliverable in major cities, but a new Community Interest Company model will help spread their influence."

## Issues with branding developments as sustainable

As **Mike** has explained, mixed-use destinations can offer sustainable advantages by their very nature. However, large issues still remain. First and foremost is the inherent problem of travelling to any destination.

"So in theory the mixed-use part of the MUD acronym is encouraging, but the word 'destination' gets the deep green amongst us twitching uncomfortably. The word 'destination' smacks of travel, and conspicuous, indulgent, carbon-belching travel at that (as in 'New York has become a popular weekend destination')."

Generally there are considered to be two key ways of reducing the impact of travel and perhaps these are pointers for the mixed-use destination as well. The first rule is that if you have to fly, do it less often and stay longer. The second mantra is to travel slowly and get under the skin of a place. **Mike** took up this point with **Alistair Sawday**, the travel book publisher and author of the acclaimed 'Go Slow England'.

**Mike**: "The 'slow towns' movement (or Cittaslow) was set up as a direct response



to the fast food culture and slow towns, such as Ludlow, have sought to maintain and extend their differences by adopting such an approach. However, such a sense of place has developed over centuries, so do our developers really have the skills and desire to develop special places or are we stuck in a Disney, megabowl, multi-screen rut forever?"

**Alistair**: "The companies and organisations that are successful at branding themselves as sustainable will be ahead of the game. Many already are. BioRegional, for example, has a well-deserved reputation - not least thanks to its old relationship with WWF - and will steal a march on competitors as the screw tightens on the building and construction industries. Climate change is only just beginning to be a force for social and business change. In the years ahead we will look back on the early years of this century as the time we got real - or not. Then there is Peak Oil, the brand new phenomenon which will have oil demand increasing as the supply decreases. The consequences will be huge and developers that have anticipated it by reducing dependency on fossil fuels will be best placed to survive. Mixed-use makes sense if communities are to be strengthened to handle change. Brand your ability to deliver that and you will be rewarded, if not in Heaven then in your AGM!"

A second major problem of sustainable development has arisen in the form of Greenwash. **Mike** is feeling typically vocal and brings us back to the main question:

"The 'S' and 'G' words are everywhere you turn, but beware of false profiteers concealing large brushes dripping with greenwash. There are many companies who need to include a photovoltaic panel in a scheme for the front cover of next year's annual report. It is more interesting to consider whether genuine, cutting edge schemes are being promoted on the eco-tag first and foremost?"



Greenwich Millennium Village

“ Perhaps some developers will be inspired (or forced) to change their approach ”

### Mixed-use as lifestyle

A brief look at the market reveals that not many new, mixed-use schemes are actively branding themselves as sustainable. However, a number of small niche, residential schemes such as the award winning Great Bow Yard scheme by Ecos Trust in Langport, are setting the standards. Larger schemes obviously face greater challenges and tend to promote themselves on quality of lifestyle rather than outright sustainability. The Urban Splash brand, for example, promises to make great places in which to live, work and play – and incorporate sustainable principles where possible. In this case, sustainability is a secondary aim that feeds into the primary one – quality of lifestyle.

**Kevin McCloud**, the television presenter and author, has established HAB (Happiness, Architecture, Beauty) to develop beautifully designed, sustainable suburban housing and echoed this belief to **Mike**:

“Hab’s secret weapon – well, not so secret now – is our use of architecture. We believe that the best way of making places that resonate with where they are and which are sustainable is through the design process.

Design has been around for at least 8,000 years. It’s a proven process that is inclusive and which, unwittingly, we all do every day. The reason it has been formalised and developed for such a long time is that it works. It demonstrably makes something better. Sustainability may represent an ethical position, it may mean changes to lifestyle and behaviour, but we believe that a well-designed environment can make those changes possible and even easy. We want residents living in our schemes to first and foremost relish the homes and the place that we have helped create. If after six months they suddenly become aware that they are actually leading a much more sustainable lifestyle – fantastic!”

### Examples of Branding as Sustainable

Thus far we’ve seen the sustainable advantages that mixing uses can bring, the issues involved and how selling a quality lifestyle is related. We next asked **Mike** to tell us the developers that are leading their brand offer with sustainability.

“Back in the higher density environs of London, First Base has a burgeoning reputation as a transformational developer. They are working on the mixed-use redevelopment of Greenwich Hospital and believe that their approach on sustainability will provide them with a market edge.”

**Mike** asked their Director, **Richard Powell**, to comment.

“At First Base our aspiration is to create balanced sustainable communities. This means that people from all walks of life can enjoy living, working, studying, playing in or visiting the places we create today and in the future. We believe that First Base customers positively differentiate the environmentally sustainable credentials of our developments and choose our homes and workspace above others.



BedZed, London



Plan for the new Hayward Gallery

We strive to enable sustainable lifestyles assisting our customers to understand the impacts of their choices and providing them with the capability to reduce their environmental impact. Our ambition at the Heart of East Greenwich is to create a remarkable place and to be London's first major zero carbon community. We are convinced that this will differentiate our scheme."

**Mike** adds the BioRegional Quintain development at Middlehaven to the list as a further example and returns to the observation that sustainable best principles are part of a lifestyle offer.

"Certainly all the indications are that BioRegional Quintain have managed to free themselves of any shackles at the Middlehaven scheme in Middlesbrough, which will be the first major mixed-use scheme in the UK built to One Planet Living standards. A Will Allsop master plan will be supplemented by buildings from Studio Egret West, FAT and Feilden Clegg Bradley. The project made a splash before commencement by winning the 'big urban projects' category at the MIPIM (Architectural Review) Future Projects Awards 2007, in Cannes. The branding of the scheme at this early stage appears to be a million miles

away from the wholemeal end of the green spectrum with an emphasis on the glamour of the design and the lifestyles that will result and, oh yes, it's sustainable too."

## Conclusions

Sustainability has a multi-faceted nature and is perhaps one reason why environmental credentials are not often branded at the forefront. The stereotyped connotations of 'green' as a rustic, single-focused, back to basics way of life contrast with one of modern urban living. But the opinions shared in this article show sustainability is about more than a single environmental dimension, with true sustainability incorporating social, cultural, economic and aesthetic values as well.

By promoting a development primarily as an attractive destination and then highlighting its ecological viability, sustainability is starting to be used to contribute to the lifestyle brand of new destinations. A minority of bold developers have embraced this, but given that we have to move rapidly towards a low carbon society, sustainable lifestyles are likely to become more attractive and will signify high-quality living. An increase in market demand for sustainable living will only reward those who

learned the lessons early and it's good to see pioneers leading the way – more should do the same.



**Mike Roberts**

Managing Director, Vertigo Sustainable Development Consultancy