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WHEN WE BUILD AGAIN : M A Field

Article for “New Start” magazine, Autumn 2009

WHEN WE BUILD AGAIN.....”

The debate about new house-building looks set to run and run.....A particular focus at present is being given to how regional and local strategies might support the creation of ‘sustainable communities’.... On one side the Government is just completing the legislative basis for top-level regional partnerships between the local authority sector and the Regional Development Agencies, in order that they will share new responsibilities for creating and implementing ‘visionary’ Regional Strategies. A particular intention behind this change is that new strategies dovetail the provision of sufficient land for new development to meet demographic growth with wider ambitions for sustained ‘economic growth’. And it is already acknowledged that new strategies will need innovative responses to current economic conditions, for capitalising on a growth in property values is no longer likely to cover the expenses underpinning such growth.

The Conservative Party, on the other hand, rehearsing its position for the next national elections, is adamant that this latest intention to reorganise regional structures will be both damagingly bureaucratic and will keep critical decisions on house-building from being properly accountable to ‘local communities’. The Tories are therefore encouraging local authorities to act as slow as they can in implementing any of the current requirements for bringing new planning frameworks forward, in order that an incoming Conservative government will have less to unpick! [The Liberal Democrats are airing similar views to review the strategic role of RDAs in the future]. Such apparent advocacy of local accountability could of course herald in a new swathe of NIMBYism that is reluctant to accept any new building development – an outcome that is already worrying the Home Builders Federation. Although the formal Conservative Party line is that the present government have failed to deliver the volume of new housing the country needs, it could be interesting to see how a widespread reluctance to endorse new building would be answered.

Beyond these competing approaches to the use of strategic bodies and regional ‘evidence’, however, there is a wider issue of what kind of ‘housing’ will be created in the long-run, and what is the practical implementation of ‘sustainability’ that will emerge? The recent report by the Audit Commission into the role and focus of local authority ‘strategic housing’ functions - “Building Better Lives : getting the best from strategic housing” – was critical of the limited degree in which local authority skills influence housing markets into increasing the benefits that can flow to local communities. Importantly the report noted that ‘blend[ing] well-informed strategy with skills in commissioning’ will be central to linking ultimate housing provision with broader community outcomes. So, while it is pertinent to think about who is customarily involved in ‘commissioning’ new housing, there is also a wider perspective about how to secure the ‘broader outcomes’ that local communities recognise as underpinning ‘better lives’.

It is somewhat ironic that one of the ambitions of the government’s proposed Eco-town programme has included a clear steer that ideas for new communities need inclusive discussion and involvement both with existing communities close-by a proposed eco-development, and through a deliberate engagement with prospective communities : the positive worth of such a stance has been somewhat drowned out by the criticism and resistance levelled against most of the potential ‘Eco-town’ locations. There has certainly been much less chance to give a more level-headed

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consideration to what could be achieved from the planning and design of new neighbourhoods being shaped through the aspirations of the 'communities' that will come to live in them - the *self-commissioned* approach. True, some commentators are recognising the extent to which UK house-building already includes development led by prospective residents : last year's Calcutt Review into the UK house-building industry noted that the UK's 'self build' sector has regularly commissioned and built more dwellings each year than any single one of the traditional volume house-building firms (i.e. more units than Barretts, or Taylor Wimpey, or Persimmon). Yet, as David Rogers *et al* have noted in the September edition of *New Start*, there is still a lack of understanding both about the interest in, and the quality of, 'mutual' and other self-commissioned forms of housing and neighbourhood services. In particular, they note the variety of 'mutual' approaches that exist provide more benefits than merely 'affordability', and should be recognised as promoting 'a sense of place' that instils 'pride' from the collective ownership.

Of course, not all 'collective' approaches are always what they seem at face value : Stephanie Saulter has noted (also in September's *New Start*) that some caution is required that Community Land Trusts do not become a passing 'flavour of the month'. Consideration does need to be given as to whether or not they will be the most appropriate response to a community's needs. And it should also be recognised that CLTs are not all the same, and are not all being set up to account for the commissioning of new property in the same way. Some are clearly coming forward as proposals for what are actually very local kinds of housing associations, with a similar kind of management structure where a non-resident 'board' takes the key decisions to create local housing for prospective tenants, as distinct from initiatives for other CLTs where the management of the body is directly comprised of CLT resident households themselves.

Contrast this with another modern collaborative-approach to self-commissioned, neighbourhoods – that of CoHousing – which provides a significantly different kind of community-led practice, combining core values for self-contained properties within a deliberately-crafted, common neighbourhood environment where shared facilities underpin neighbourly interests and a strong identity. Such principles seem especially relevant to planning future residential provision for older people for, as continental examples of Cohousing amply demonstrate, the combination of private accommodation with common facilities in an intentionally shared neighbourhood environment, suggest an extremely credible alternative to the narrow approach of replacing 'sheltered accommodation' by 'extra-care' facilities. Yet while the few UK examples of CoHousing neighbourhoods have begun to reap critical acclaim and awards, its key characteristics are still not widely understood by authorities that are key to unlocking housing and neighbourhood resources : the UK CoHousing Network has needed to argue at senior levels of the Homes and Community Agency that it is much more than neighbourhood development for the 'affluent'. The few CoHousing developments that have come forward in the UK to date have been from groups of households pooling personal resources to acquire land on the open market, but these represent very isolated examples of collaborative success in securing such a basic resource. A constant complaint from groups with collaborative aspirations for housing and neighbourhood development – whether they have access to funding resources or not - is the sense of being outside conventional networks that routinely trade in land and property estate. That, and the complaint that 'collaborative' aspirations are too frequently treated with suspicion by the mainstream statutory bodies who are familiar with planning *on behalf of* neighbourhoods, but less with neighbourhoods planning on behalf of themselves.

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So how might future strategic and decision-making structures - whether at regional, sub-regional or local levels - engage with people wishing to 'claim' new neighbourhoods for their own? And how might the commissioning of some new neighbourhoods avoid the obstacles that mutually-based or collaborative groups currently experience? A few suggestions would be :

- Under the current plans for new regional structures, the ways in which 'Housing & Regeneration' issues will be enshrined within new strategies can include some clear touchstones for how the planning and development of new neighbourhoods should promote bottom-up initiatives. One such promotion could be through taking up the proposal put forward in 2008 by the Housing Forum that an element of land should be given a new classification of 'community interest', in order that community-led initiatives are not undermined through high land prices. Another promotion could be that regional guidelines for local planning frameworks - whether or not the current LDF-frameworks are maintained – require that the planning and creation of new neighbourhoods make space for collaborative or 'collective' endeavours.
- In order to provide more spatial opportunities for the kinds of resident-led neighbourhood proposals that self-build, CoHousing and other co-operative groups would bring, preference should be given to their claim on parts of wider development areas that are the subject of 'Area Masterplans' or similar design codes. Such long-term planning processes could encourage collaborative interests to come forward – the earlier the better – so that the wider development could proceed through both conventional and community-led development, and both contribute to a future richness of the new environments taking take. An encouragement to planning and developing through 'modular' spatial grids, with local infrastructure services being structured so as to permit an easy supply and management at a very neighbourhood-based level (as currently being explored by *emda* and partners) would be a further means to help resident-led initiatives take hold.
- If new local housing 'trusts' are to be established, as being championed by the Conservatives, care will need to be taken that a blanket NIMBYism does not stifle plans for new dwellings. It would be natural that any new Trusts are accountable to those already living in an area, however they should be also be accountable to those looking to be part of the future housing and neighbourhoods in that area.
- In order to help resident-led initiatives to be successfully inclusive, it will be of great value for groups looking to develop a range of property tenures that, providing they meet government standards set for social housing, they can acquire formal recognition as 'social housing suppliers' in their own right. The current consideration by the new Tenant Services Authority to accept new registrations from small local housing and development bodies is to be encouraged here.
- If the locally-commissioned route is to be promoted in the way that other 'sustainable' aspects of new development have been encouraged (through, for example, awards for aesthetic design, or use of 'eco'-materials), then why not instigate a new prize specifically for new neighbourhoods planned by their future residents – an award for a version of 'ethically sourced' planning!

It was in 1985 at a time of growing uncertainty on what 'new' housing might represent, that Pluto published a new book from Colin Ward, "When we build again,

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let's get it right". It was an impassioned argument that the building of more houses is not simply something that is solely done *for* people, but needs to be part of an inclusive and bottom-up practice towards creating *communities*, for the ultimate success of these will be in the extent that these will happen *through* local people having a defining influence at all stages. It is an argument for a style of sustainable planning and development relationships that is still in need of reiteration and a new publication about to be issued by CABE on 'new models for house building' will be very welcome in this respect. The current debates on house numbers and wider strategies are all very well, however they risk repeating the conventional focus upon the *quantity* of properties, rather than on the *quality* of their planning and of the neighbourhoods within which they will ariseIt was the 'we' that was crucial to the focus of Ward's book then, just as it is the 'we' that needs to be at the heart of how new neighbourhoods and communities are commissioned now. 'Mutual' and 'collaborative' routes to the creation of dwellings and common facilities need to be at the heart of future development, not left on the peripheries. As the evidence suggests, put the opportunities forward and the awards will come.

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- *all views expressed are personal to the author*]