Making Space for Place
from development management to planning
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Abstract

This paper surveys the position that place currently holds within the discipline of planning in the UK, and advocates a move away from current models of development management to one of explicit place-making.

The paper’s concern is the planning system itself, not what can be added on to correct it. The immediate contexts for the study are the current debate on planning system reform and the demise of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE).

The 1947 Planning Act brought about a bureaucratization of planning. Until then planning, as a more or less ambiguous ‘art’, had largely concerned itself with the design of places, but henceforth would see itself as a function of local government concerned with regulating land-use. The 1947 Act did not mention design, while the Schuster Committee’s (1950) findings that planning was a task for public administration resulted in a diminishment of design as a basic part of the planners’ approach to solving the social and environmental problems confronting place.

The consequence is a planning system which ill-considers place-making. A problem that national government recognises through continuous intervention, issuing a plethora of guidance notes and establishing ‘corrective’ bodies, culminating in the setting up of CABE in 1999. However, these are add-ons, applied unequally. In contrast the authors advocate amending the system itself – in tandem with re-introducing the 2- and 3-dimensional skills appropriate to place-making into the education of planners; skills which have currently atrophied.

The paper argues that the planning application process become a shared conversation, a true design process in which decisions about place are made during the process, not through addressing abstract policy documents issued prior to it, or reviews conducted after it. To ground this dialogue in a necessarily wider social and environmental understanding of place, and to give the certainty the current system lacks, a place-plan should be established – a detailed urban design and land use plan produced by architects, urbanists, planners and patrons working together as designers and mandated by the Local Planning Authority.

The authors’ proposals draw upon workshops the authors undertook with the Planning Inspectorate and CABE which tested these ideas, as well as their experience of place-making and its promotion in practice and higher education in the UK and abroad. These include the Project for Public Spaces Organisation in the United States, and place-plans in France, the Netherlands and Finland.
Introduction – the mess we’re in

Following the autumn 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, Lord Howarth, a former Arts Minister instrumental in the creation of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in 1999, reacted to its planned closure by saying: “We can’t rely on the culture that CABE has promoted continuing without CABE given the cynicism of too many developers and the ignorance of too many planners” (our italics).¹

Since the 1947 Town & Country Planning Act (T&CP Act, 1947), the UK planning system’s implementation of place-making can broadly be characterized as a regulatory procedure measuring applications against policies – rather than pro-actively contributing to the “making of place”, to cite the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) strap-line. In practice the current system places responsibility for place-making with the applicants; however this is not the applicant’s job. As John Callcutt, the former head of Crest Nicholson has remarked, there is no incentive for a house-builder to build well when the planning system allows poor quality developments to “get away with it”.²

National government has implicitly recognized this limited role of planning in promoting well-designed places. Firstly, through issuing a plethora of ancillary policies and guidance, and secondly, through its establishment of supplementary statutory and non-statutory bodies dating from the earliest National Parks to CABE itself. However, neither action addresses the planning system itself, nor its capacity to shape place, so that we continue to rely on a fundamentally unaltered sixty-five year old planning system.

The RTPIs Shaping the Future (2010), a “manifesto for planning”, continues to appeal to a procedural approach couched in abstract values: “Spatial, Sustainable, Integrative, Inclusive, Value-driven, Action-oriented”, which it advocates achieving through “providing better planning skills and resources”, in which significantly it does not include design, or any other specific place-making skills.³ It is this omission, and the reluctance of government to tackle the planning process, that this paper seeks to address.

The 1947 T&CP Act fundamentally changed town planning in Britain. It moved it from a discipline in which the ‘arts’ of planning could flourish and which could creatively suggest a better future to a technocratic and bureaucratic process.⁴ But we do not promote a nostalgic view of an era largely concerned with purely visual understandings of the environment, particularly given the ever more urgent need to define and encourage sustainable places. Clearly, any system of planning must “take account of a much wider set of issues currently
excluded from statutory systems of land-use planning, for example, inequalities in health and education, energy policy, the rural economy and urban design".\(^5\) Our point is that previously place-making was fundamental to planning in the UK, and could be made so again in the future. In fact, not only could it be restored, the 2008 Planning Act actually endorses such an approach, stating the decision-maker “must have regard to the desirability of achieving good design”.\(^6\)

Current high-profile government initiatives in England to streamline and, at the same time, localize decision-making within the planning system are, however, a missed opportunity to encourage good design. The Draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the Localism Bill may appear to empower communities, but in their efforts to do so they diminish the critical agency of planning in shaping enduring and sustainable places, substituting it with a quite extraordinary faith in the amateurism of local advocacy groups and the good-will of developers.\(^7\) This paucity of ambition and execution is brought into relief when compared to, for example, the French system of *zone d’aménagement concerté* (ZAC) which introduces a measure of design-led localism (fig. 1).\(^8\)

![Figure 1. Ecoquartier Clichy Batignolles 2011 aerial montage (Mairie de Paris / ParisBatignolles aménagement)](image-url)
How we got into this mess

To understand why planning as an agent of place-making is so belittled in England, it behoves us to look back to the 1947 T&CP Act (fig. 2). The system it introduced was not inevitable but a matter of choice. Other countries, facing similar circumstances and with similar motives in the aftermath of the Second World War, adopted other approaches. They produced measurably differing planning systems and experiences that, while they employ differing processes and differing kinds of planner, do not mean we cannot learn from them.9

![Figure 2. Flow diagram of post-1947 T&CP Act planning application process (the authors)](image)

In England planning was prescribed as a regulatory function of local government, and the 1947 T&CP Act neither encouraged design, nor even mentioned the word ‘design’. The subsequent Schuster Committee report (1950) confirmed planning as a task for public administration and its politicians; but, as William Holford observed at the time, there was no guarantee that these “graduates of university schools of history, law and political economy” […] would know anything about the techniques of planning […] They could tell in legal terms what could not be done, but they could very seldom suggest, out of their own experience what could be done”.10

The outcome of all of this has been the establishment of a planning system in which design has no place – but a system in which there is an inherent tension: on the one side planning is bidden by policy to promote effective land-use and development, on another it is a
defensive mechanism seeking to preserve the status quo. A duality that is reflected in two kinds of planner: ‘Policy planners’ operating at a remove from the front-line and concentrating on the generalities of policy and their legal base etc., and ‘Development Management’ planners assessing individual applications. So that, while the 2005 National Planning Forum may say, “Good planning and good design are two sides of the same coin”, places, far from being designed, come about through policy planners writing negatively worded policies on the basis of which development management planners have the ammunition to refuse.

Attempts to cultivate ‘place’ through supplementing the limitations of this system have consisted of piecemeal reactions interpreted through political legislation and judicial interventions. These have manifested themselves in the plethora of ‘design policy’; generalized guidance and procedures, all culminating in recent prescriptive ‘tick-box’ design standards that seek not only to augment the limitations of the planning system, but also to compensate for the skills that have atrophied in the planning profession over the last sixty-five years. When government ran out of words for policy, it set up quangoes, including some that are now taken for granted as part of the planning system itself, such as the Planning Inspectorate (PINS). Others set up over the years include New Town Development Corporations, Urban Development Corporations, the Civic Trust, the RFAC, its successor CABE, and the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA).

![Figure 3. The cliché of abstracted ‘good place’; copper engraving of the Campo, Siena, circa 1760. (Martin Randall)](image-url)
Planning Place

Before arguing for any reform, it is important to make explicit what we mean by place. Although we do not have space to discuss this at length here, we do suggest the following. It is no one single definition, nor single good example (fig 3). It is not something to be summed up in a paragraph or two of planning policy, nor in a list of criteria to be checked off when making a planning application. It is even less the abstracted ‘essence’ which dominates the aesthetic pursuits of so much recent architectural literature.

Instead, we would argue that it is dynamic and responsive, supportive of the values of a contemporary and future society, accommodating diverse forces such as climate change, carbon reduction, mental and physical health, bio-diversity, society, exchange, better land use, economic change.\(^{17}\) We would also argue that it is robust enough to evolve as part of the inevitable forces of inhabitation and weathering, a duration that suggests the ‘character’, which, as Christian Norburg-Schulz has said, is what satisfies man’s need “to identify himself with the environment, to know how he is in a certain place”.\(^{18}\) Which is not a remarkable observation; what is remarkable is how often places have been designed that ignore these values.

In drawing all these complex elements together to shape place we recognize the importance of planning; as the RTPI advocates “A properly resourced planning system, working within the right framework, is key to achieving ambitions for sustainable development, economic growth and successful places for people…”\(^{19}\) However, we do not believe that it is enough to state policies or good intentions, instead we argue that the fulfilment of these ambitions necessitates design and design-literacy throughout the planning profession; put simply planning needs to plan, it cannot just manage.

We propose two changes to the planning process to enable it to reclaim its role as an agency for creating place, changes we believe could be achieved through tweaking the existing system rather than any unrealistic legal changes (fig 4). Firstly, the adoption of a place-plan that sets out the local authority’s three-dimensional objective alongside the land use provisions of its two-dimensional local plan. Secondly, the making of planning applications only after a shared brief for development has been negotiated and agreed, but before any detailed design has taken place – after sixty-five years finally putting the horse before the cart.
This is instead of the existing wasteful procedure of a detailed design being made against the ambiguities of policies, guidance notes and the local plan, and only then being put forward as a planning application with the detailed discussion and critique taking place after the event (and quite possibly leading to endless revisions, conditions and appeals, fig 2).

Our idea goes much further than the ‘pre-app discussions’ and ‘planning performance agreements’ (PPA) that emerged from the 2008 Killian-Pretty Report, and currently cited as ‘best practice’. But Killian-Pretty’s focus was on the tardiness and uncertainty of the planning system – not its handling of design. The former are inconclusive, with planning officers not wishing to commit their employer to any future course of action, so that at best the outcome of the discussions are a weak, unreliable and heavily conditioned letter from the LPA, inevitably headed ‘without prejudice’. While PPAs are essentially a process-oriented tool designed to allow for faster determination of applications; in which capacity they have merit, but not in fundamentally addressing place-making.

We seek to ensure good design as well as a quick and certain decision, and see no merit in revising the 1947 system merely to extend an ethos and procedures that do not actively promote a better environment. The present system has tinkered with place-making...
consistently placing the weight of its negotiations and actions, such as design reviews, on the end of the process. Innovative design has floundered, and mediocrity has been the winner. Inevitably this has led to a system that is characterized, and experienced as, negative and carping – all to the detriment of any conception of good planning.

By illustration, we seek a practice of planning and design akin to the remit of the Urban Design Studio of Portland, Oregon’s City Bureau of Planning and Sustainability – note the joining up of these two ideas. This “takes the initiative in leading and facilitating design discussions […] This process of testing new ideas, engaging in deliberate, targeted debate and weighing important choices offers critical opportunities for the introduction of innovative design solutions…”

**Brief & Design**

In the context of our proposed planning process we see the design process as having two distinct but inter-related parts (fig 4). An announced ‘intention to develop’ triggers the creation of a brief, informed by the wider place-plan, and produced through a shared conversation between the planners, the client and their agents, as well as any stakeholders. Such a brief could be used for all proposals, large or small. No more time is required than at present, it is simply a question of redistributing the effort from one of administrative checking further down the line, to one that commits time up front to doing some real planning and to establishing the parameters of design. Once approved by the LPA, this binding document constitutes an ‘agreement to develop’ that sets out the three-dimensional urban design qualities of the forthcoming design and ensures that it contributes towards the objectives of the wider place-plan.

The subsequent detailed design follows on from this, with no particular requirement for the LPA to be involved again until granting ‘confirmation of development’ at the completion of the project; this confirmation being simply the certification that the design and subsequent construction has been carried out in accordance with the agreed brief. There would be no discussion about land-use or design. However, if at any stage during the detailed design process the possibility of diverting from the brief emerges, the LPA can of course be consulted on its view.

The focus on the brief in our proposal is critical, as a good project is only as a good as its brief. Currently LPA briefs for ‘making place’ tend to be a short report with no diagrams or
descriptive images, produced in response to a site coming on the market, not a comprehensive look at the wider picture (fig 5). Limited only to the skills of the planners writing them, they are made without the expert design skills which might unlock the potential of a site. In contrast, we would characterise our proposed process as a shared conversation between planners, architects and clients, in which collaboration replaces compromise as all parties contribute to unlocking the potential of the site.

**Figure 5.** Croydon General Hospital Site, Planning and Design Brief, Urban Design Guidelines (Croydon Council)

The transformation into a detailed design then rests with the architects who are able to work with the certainty of an agreed brief, knowing they do not have to worry about any intervention on matters of design. It is in this way akin to a well-run architectural competition, such as for the procurement of public buildings in Scandinavia, and in the trust that characterizes the Scandinavian tradition more generally. It can be done here, and, indeed, our proposal in many ways takes what is already evident best practice, in which patrons and designers consult with planners before undertaking a project, a step further.

Furthermore, and most importantly, the whole costly process of development no longer takes place ‘at risk’. A criticism of planning is that it is confrontational and inflexible, and can dissuade developers, particularly at times of economic contraction etc. With ‘permission to develop’ already granted on the basis of the agreed brief, in our proposal risk is alleviated,
patrons are no longer ‘applicants’, and the actual detailed design of a project now takes place after planning, or rather, as a continuity with planning. Smaller scale / local developers, common in many other countries but rarer in the UK, would be encouraged to undertake projects in the knowledge that they will have certainty before they need commit their resources.

3 Contexts

For this new approach to planning to succeed, we identify three changes that would need to be put into place:

Currently all conversations about individual planning applications take place within the limited context of the ‘local plan’, limited in that it is two-dimensional, and primarily describes land-use rather than place. Central policy, non-statutory bodies, and local anxieties may condition its interpretation, but its very format and scale prevents it ever being more than an ambivalent indicator of an integrated and sustainable place (fig 6). While, again, the need to second-guess those contexts that lie beyond the individual applicant’s boundary entails huge risk for any would be developer. In effect, the ambiguities of current local plans act as an accidental form of planning blight.

Figure 6. Salisbury City Centre Local Plan  (Salisbury District Council)
We advocate that a *place-plan* should be drawn-up to sit alongside the local plan. Produced by architects, urbanists, planners and patrons working together, and mandated by the Local Planning Authority (LPA), this three-dimensional plan would encapsulate the identity, social structures, physical appearance, movement and connectivity that credible places demand (fig 7). The *place-plan* would contextualize any single development proposal as a fragment of its wider environment: the ‘labyrinthine clarity’ of the surrounding street, its neighbourhood, its quarter. It would set out the grain, density and scale of development, and secure those wider values that the LPA wishes to promote. A *place-plan* is fundamentally the spatial brief a democratically accountable LPA sets out for the place it wishes to encourage – a true localism.

![Figure 7](perspective_sketch_of_kop_van_zuidvelopment,_rotterdam_(gemeente_rotterdam))

Our suggestions are evidently conditioned by the need for a design-literate planning profession, and while it is not our intention to suggest all planners become designers, they do need to have the capacity to understand and reflect upon design, just as a non-artist can make a significant understanding of art history. Currently not all planners can do this, that is, have the confidence to brief, to discuss and to critique design – the very means through which place is enabled. This skills-gap has been repeatedly identified as a critical failing, to quote the *National Planning Forum Manifesto for Good Design*: “Design skills should be central to planners’ education and continuing professional development - design is not a specialism but is at the heart of good planning. All planners should be given the opportunity of improving their design skills.” Restoring these skills to planning is not insurmountable, as, for example, the jointly accredited RIBA & RTPI Architecture & Planning course at UWE Bristol shows, and which is now the largest full-time planning course in the country. While
our own experience in running workshops together with CABE & PINS showed a readiness of the existing profession to take on and develop design skills. 26

Finally, there is a shift in architects’ role. At one level they are given far greater freedom in the certainty of the detailed design stage. At another, they are ethically beholden to look beyond their marginal role dealing solely with the job at hand. That is, to re-engage with their historical agency and commitment to town planning and place-making, taking part as active and expert citizens in the formation of the democratically accountable place-plan.

From regulation to conversation

In conclusion, and taking note of these three contexts, we argue that our model would be a start to enabling planners to plan, architects to design, clients to act as patrons, in an accountable planning process that promotes place (fig 4). As a reaction to the plight of the post-war period the 1947 T&CP Act can, with the benefit of hindsight, be seen as a necessarily radical enactment, but one that overemphasized a regulatory, policy-based and procedural approach to planning. Past attempts to right this have only resulted in piecemeal and ineffective procedural changes. Sixty-five years on, we argue that current circumstances require an equally bold move to the 1947 Act if we are to secure a physically and socially sustainable environment; a radical undertaking that goes to the heart of the planning process and remakes it as the discipline and agency of place-making.
NOTES

6 HMG, Planning Act 2008, s. 183
8 As John Vaizey said of the contrast between the National Heath Service and Continental European health systems, they were “not commented upon because nobody thought to do so”. John Vaizey In Breach of Promise Weidenfeld, London 1983 p.40, quoted in David Kynaston, 2009, Family Britain Bloomsbury, London, p.79.
10 This article is not concerned with Planners in private consultancies.
15 Other NGO style agencies include the Civic Trust, English Heritage, and UNESCO.
16 See RTPI Seven Principles of Planning
Almost all local planning authorities prepare Planning Briefs for important sites likely to be developed in the foreseeable future: see also, for example:


UWE Bristol 18th-20th February 2008 and @Bristol 21st-23rd February 2009.