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Greenwich Millennium Village: planned sustainability?

The United Kingdom is promoting an urban renaissance through by creating sustainable communities. How does one define this, so that members of a community can relate to it and become active members in the process? The Millennium Village Project, one which is still evolving, brings light to these issues. While it has lofty aims of social integration and ecological responsibility, as well as instigation of the creation of a supportive governmental framework it also makes it evident that the necessary framework is not yet a sufficient construct.

The competition

John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, has taken an initiative through the establishment of The Urban Task Force to integrate social, economic, and environmental issues in the development of sustainable communities at a sufficient density to promote reduction of land and automobile use.¹ Additionally, plans will promote redevelopment of the urban periphery, where brownfields of post-industrial landscapes await the purification and the infill of new programs. As a key part of this initiative, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has begun the Thames Gateway project, which addresses the waterfront of the Thames River of London that was previously the site of gasworks and factories. Within this long string of sites, sits Greenwich Peninsula where the famous Millennium Dome, by Richard Rogers Partnership, was constructed for the Millennium celebrations. Rogers was commissioned to design a master plan for the peninsula with the design for the Dome, which began the establishment of an infrastructure for a sustainable development, that focuses on the creation of jobs; use

of new energy and water saving standards; making use of modern building techniques and off-site manufacture of materials; using good quality design and planning; promoting pedestrian transportation and creating a sustainable social mix of 35% affordable to 65% private housing. His plan provided for reconstruction of the natural ecosystem of the river's edge and a series of 'urban villages' designed in an architectural competition. Hunt Thompson and Associates of London, and Erskine Tovatt Architects of Sweden—a firm known for numerous social housing projects—designed the winning plan¹.

The Goals

A conversation that is continually being conducted in the UK on many levels involves the notion of creating sustainable communities. In order to enter into this conversation, sustainability in this context should be defined. One of many definitions known as The Aalborg Declaration, adopted at the first European Conference on Sustainable Cities and Towns, as used by the Urban Task Force it treats the sustainable settlement as a self-regulating interconnected social, economic, and environmental system which meets its needs and manages its impacts internally, or by fair reciprocal arrangements. In addition, there are seven themes for sustainability that are necessarily reevaluated and changed. Currently they have adopted seven broad criteria for a sustainable community that are listed on the Urban Task Force website²:

1. Resource consumption should be minimized
2. Local environmental capital should be protected and enhanced
3. Design quality should be high

4. Residents should enjoy a high quality of life
5. Equity and social inclusion should be increased
6. Participation in governance should be as broad as possible
7. The community should be commercially viable in the sense of not requiring public subsidies to maintain its performance on the other criteria.

In addition to the government's established situation, Hunt Thompson and Associates have created their own framework for discussion of issues of sustainability, through the Sustainable Placemaking Forum, which provides seminars and online discussion that proposes new ideas for creating integrated communities in terms of social connectivity through the management of public spaces, integration of tenures and community discussion through online created systems.

How does a social network relate to sustainability? According to the Urban Task Force, “The planning and implementation of settlements affects quality of life in many ways above and beyond physical design issues.” Within a connected community, personal investment is established among residents and people are less likely to move frequently, resulting in less greenfield development. Also, as residents hold their community in high regard, there is a better chance of achieving support in regard to environmental sustainability¹. The notion of sustainable communities is still in its infancy, so there is no definite model and there is no guarantee one will work. Consequently, there is a continual need to evaluate and assess the conditions of community design in such a way that the process continues to evolve, and the key issues remain as much in the forefront as possible.

The Evaluation

In the case of the Millennium Village it is questionable whether the key issues are in the forefront of the project. If the elements of the proposed design, and the current state of the process are considered, the difficulty in the execution of the design of a large scale, high profile project with numerous participants is revealed. There is a lack of any sort of hierarchy in the project, which seems to contribute to the problems.

Upon entering the website of Millennium Village, LLC², there are dramatic graphics boasting a community of the 21st Century and a pronouncement stating, “The most exciting and innovative residential development in Europe...will act as a standard-bearer not only in its architecture and design but also in its vision of how to create a new, more intelligent way of living using the very latest environmentally friendly technologies.” Despite their ambitious statement, what is the result of actually applying the criteria for a sustainable community to Millennium Village, proposed and present?

1. Resource consumption should be minimized

The community aims to achieve this through reduction of water usage by one-third the norm, use of Combined Heat and Cooling power plants using biomass fuel and space flexibility through moving walls and

installation of floor to ceiling glazing and shading devices³. Despite this, the winning architecture firm, Hunt Thompson and Associates, has resigned from the project “because the original ecological (or sustainable) standards were increasingly being run down by the developers, to such an extent that they could no longer sign-up to the project.”⁴ According to a study of light and thermal conditions conducted by students of London’s AA on some of Erskine’s flats and found that the plan layout made the spaces either too dark or they overheated.⁵ Also, apartments are all designed with similar strategies, regardless of their orientation—not a particularly responsive method of design.

2. Local environmental capital should be protected and enhanced

Prior to 100 years ago, the land on Greenwich Peninsula was known for its wildlife and fisheries, but when the Blackwall Tunnel linked it to the North Bank a period of industry and pollution dominated until it was purchased by English Partnerships (part of the public sector) in 1997 and cleaned up for safe reuse. The redevelopment of the peninsula has planned for terraced greenspaces at the water’s edge with plants that will encourage the return of natural wildlife to the site¹. In this case, due to the lack of existing environmental capital, restoration is vital and at the moment useful efforts are being made in that area. Public ‘Garden Squares’ will be built in neighborhood blocks, turf for football will be installed throughout the site and greenways will connect all neighborhoods and services on the peninsula for use by pedestrians and cyclists². If these natural projects are carried out, they will certainly be beneficial; however, currently, the area is rather barren and isolated.

3. Design quality should be high Residents should enjoy a high quality of life

A description of innovative new housing blocks with contemporary designs fills the webpage. HTA had goals of designing a “New Vernacular Kit” for the project, utilizing construction innovation to provide future choice for residents. components of interior modification would be produced in a factory, so that they could be easily chosen by residents and fitted to a home as their needs change.

This contributes, also, to achieving a high quality of life; if people feel they have the ability to modify their spaces as their needs change, there could potentially be a higher personal investment in the area. However, no kit has been developed, and flexibility is solely achieved with movable partitions.³ Design of public spaces should be high as well. The beginnings of the greenway system for cyclists and pedestrians are under construction, but if the space is lacking in destinations, will they improve quality of life, or depress it due to isolation? Quality of life depends on feelings of safety and accessibility of services. If greenways exist in an isolated context of abandoned industry, neither of these criteria would be filled.⁴

Equity and social inclusion should be increased

The village has planned for 1377 homes of mixed-tenure—for sale, rent, or managed by Affordable Housing Association—with no visible distinction between types of housing, in order to maximize social inclusion¹. With integrated designs, if people's economic situation improves, they can change their tenure without leaving the community, which, again, relates to increasing personal investment.

In actuality, much of the social housing, though nearby, is separated from the owned homes. Separation exists because amenities provided to wealthier owners such as a 24-hour doorman and concierge or an intensely landscaped entry cannot be offered to social housing residents due to high costs². So, one wonders if disparity between income levels will be emphasized due to their proximity, yet obvious separation.

Participation in governance should be as broad as possible

Governance for the village, as previously mentioned, is part of an extensive framework that is being established as high up as the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and as low as the interactive village website, which provides a forum for making community decisions and initiatives.

This system, though not running completely fluidly yet, is highly planned. The Urban Task force has contracted URBED, The Urban and Economic Development Group, Ltd., and MORI, a regeneration and planning research group, to determine how people acquire or form views about urban versus suburban versus rural—acquiring information beyond just likes and dislikes in relationship to housing and communities. They will research and observe methods of local authorities and URBED will assess twenty-four towns and cities over ten months to produce a “Renaissance Profile” on progress, which can eventually serve as a guide for future development. Lastly, MORI will hold one-day citizen workshops in eight of the towns and cities with a cross-section of the residents and other partners in order to determine how change is spreading and whether the communities are thought to be successful. The framework for the monitoring questions is outlined on the Urban Task Force website. Criteria are divided into similar categories to the ones that are being used in this paper.³

On the level of urban centers, funding of Local Architectural Centers is allocated to encourage public involvement in design issues by sponsoring community projects, exhibits and seminars. The local government organization Groundwork, will support “Community Enablers” through the Green Flag Award for public spaces

that are well managed, sustainable, and have community involvement¹.

Lastly, there is the level of the community itself. Sustainable Placemaking Seminars have frequently addressed the relevance of web-based communication for increasing involvement and connecting with a more diverse scope of residents in regards to their community. Malcolm Pitcher, director of PCL and In-House Research, a marketing research and customer satisfaction specialist stated that focus groups are often swayed by a few outspoken people, whereas the web provides a certain amount of anonymity, if so desired, and allows people to contribute on their own time. This forum aims to establish a connected, active community that discusses issues openly. The management company for the area employing residents of the social housing for maintaining the shared public space, which would also provide jobs. Residents, upon purchase of their home, would set up the village trust. However, this creates issues in terms of social inclusion because the money would have to be supplied only by the buyers, resulting in part of the community supporting the other. Local authorities are avoiding resolution of this by providing management through an outside company who provides its own workers from outside the community.

The community should be commercially viable in the sense of not requiring public subsidies to maintain its performance on the other criteria.

...Establishment of the right links with the wider regional, national and international community.¹

Millennium Village promotes their establishment of community services and jobs: “Adjacent to Greenwich Millennium Village is a primary school, creche, health centre and convenience store. There is a large public park and sports pitch, new riverside terraces and paths and, close to the village center, a new clubhouse and moorings for Greenwich Yacht Club.” In addition, there will be plenty of public transportation and shops and restaurants within walking distance. Currently, the village is equipped with these amenities, the beginnings to a self-sufficient community. One must also recognize, though, the existing community that it seems Millennium Village has chosen to neglect. Richard Burdett of the Urban Task Force states at a Sustainable Placemaking Seminar his concerns about the Millennium Village project becoming a series of

inward-looking clusters with a limited connection with the outside context. The “village” currently consists of two housing blocks in a very isolated swath of land--not quite from an integrated walking community. A description of the process of traveling to the peninsula development from old Greenwich is described by Deyan Sudjic, “To get from 19th century London to the 21st century you have to negotiate what feels like an asteroid belt dotted with ...anonymous sheds, elevated motorways and an empty landscape of reclaimed spoil heaps and industrial waste.”³ Additionally, the Victorian town center of old Greenwich is in need of revitalization due to a large highway system and problems with traffic management that detract from the town center. An influx of tourism to the Millennium Dome has increased the problem⁴. It seems odd, that a community in Greenwich would ignore the existing commercial context in the design of a highly integrated community with local jobs and activity centers.

The goals of Millennium Village have not been carried out as of yet, and according to discussion in the Sustainable Placemaking Seminars and articles such as Deyan Sudjic’s it is uncertain when they will. Much of these problems seem to be with the lack of priority. How does one determine which is more important, when cut-backs are made? While the framework established by the Urban Task force makes efforts to understand the nature of community, issues are never prioritized, so there is no way of distinguishing which is more important, creating a pedestrian network, or having energy efficient homes. The evaluation process is hopefully ongoing and evolving, so that those involved on all levels can be informed on the challenges of designing sustainable communities.

¹ According to the Urban Task Force, Urban Renaissance will be created through the identification of causes of urban decline in England, the recommendation of practical solutions to bring people back into our cities, and the establishment of a new vision for urban regeneration.

Urban Task Force. "Mission Statement." 03 April 2004: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbpol_608462-01.hcsp#P20_513

² "London: The New Millennium." Architects' Journal 1997. Nov. 20 v. 206 n. 19 p. I-xvi, 76-77.

³ Urban Task Force. "Towards an urban renaissance: report of the Urban Task Force - executive summary" Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 03 April 2004: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbpol_608462.hcsp

⁴ Pitcher, Malcolm and Florence Hunt. "customer choice" 10 July 2000, Sustainable Placemaking Forum: www.sustainable-placemaking.org/past.htm.

⁵ Greenwich Millennium Village 04 April 2004: www.greenwich-village.co.uk

⁶ Edwards, Brian and David Turrent (ed.). Sustainable Housing: Principles and Practices. London; New York: E & FN Spon, 2000.

⁷ Personal communication with Koen Steemers, 15 March 2004.

⁸ Personal communication with Dr Susannah Hagan, 30 March 2004.

⁹ "London: The New Millennium." Architects' Journal. 1997. Nov. 20 v. 206 n. 19 p. I-xvi, 76-77.

¹⁰ Greenwich Millennium Village 04 April 2004: www.greenwich-village.co.uk

¹¹ JSS Pinnacle. "Neighbourhood Management and Sustainability." Sustainable Placemaking Forum Seminar. 24 November 2000: www.sustainable-placemaking.org.

¹² The Urban Task Force expresses these criteria as components of establishing quality of life in their charts for evaluation. Urban Task Force. "Towards an urban renaissance: report of the Urban Task Force - executive summary" Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 03 April 2004: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbpol_608462.hcsp

¹³ Greenwich Millennium Village 04 April 2004: www.greenwich-village.co.uk

¹⁴ JSS Pinnacle. "Neighbourhood Management and Sustainability." Sustainable Placemaking Forum Seminar. 24 November 2000: www.sustainable-placemaking.org.

¹⁵ The criteria used were provided in the opening definition of sustainable communities in the website of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

¹⁶ Urban Task Force. "Millennium villages and sustainable communities" Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 03 April 2004: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbpol_608462.hcsp

¹⁷ Urban Task Force. "Towards an urban renaissance: report of the Urban Task Force - executive summary" Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 03 April 2004: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbpol_608462.hcsp

¹⁸ An additional related statement put out through the Urban Task Force.

¹⁹ Greenwich Millennium Village 04 April 2004: www.greenwich-village.co.uk

²⁰ Sudjic, Deyan. "Strictly for Faux Village People." Guardian Unlimited. (online journal) 2001 October 28.

²¹ "Planning Chaos Leaves the Other Greenwich in the Lurch." Architects' Journal. 1997 July 24 v. 206 N. 4 p.18.

Pictures

1. "London: The New Millennium." Architects' Journal 1997. Nov. 20 v. 206 n. 19 p. I-xvi, 76-77.

2. Greenwich Millennium Village 04 April 2004: www.greenwich-village.co.uk

3. www.photoguide.to/london/greenwich2.html

4. www.surrey.ac.uk/USEB/

5. Edwards, Brian and David Turrent (ed.). Sustainable Housing: Principles and Practices. London; New York: E & FN Spon, 2000.

6. Edwards, Brian and David Turrent (ed.). Sustainable Housing: Principles and Practices. London; New York: E & FN Spon, 2000.