

# Novocastrian Urbanism

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## The Challenges of Sustainable Urban Living for the North East

The slightly subversive agenda behind this half day conference in April and its 'play on words' title was to bring New Urbanism to Newcastle.

There was added relevance due to the recent publication of PPG3 (draft) on housing, which addresses the same urbanity issues.

John Montgomery (Urban Cultures) advocated a strong case for principles of urbanity, achieved through understanding the interconnections between activities, built form and physiological meaning within a city. His conceptual model of the city is not one of segregation and zoning but of multiple layers, where overlapping activities and social meaning resulted in variety and diversity. Central to successful urbanity is *street life* apparent in levels of animation, cultural diversity, mixed uses, temporal variations and the 'number of cake shops'. The multi-layered street should be a venue where opportunities are available for people watching, cafe culture and social interaction, adding to a network of cultural attractors within the city. The built form, particularly housing, should support these principles of urbanity through good detailing, adaptability, contextualisation and most importantly higher densities. He warned of the dangers of over-regulation, rigid standards and over-management of public spaces; especially in relation to restrictive opening times. There should be blurred edges and some aspects of unpredictability and chaos to urbanity - all of which are anathema to suburban culture.

Patrick Clarke and Paul Drew (Llewelyn Davies) presented their research work on 'sustainable residential quality' (SRQ) - where housing is considered a major contribution to principles of urbanism and linked to a street life based on pedestrian movement and activities. This work is driven by national household projections and the potential for smaller urban in-fill sites to contribute to this figure while helping to regenerate cities. The specific constraints and opportunities of smaller brownfield sites has given rise to a design-led approach, recognising the positive role that new housing can play in reurbanising and improving residential choice and quality. In identified sites within 'pedsheds' (400m walking distance of town/district centres), the approach tests "... alternative assumptions about density, car parking provision and road layouts, to explore whether a more flexible and creative approach would enable more housing to be accommodated within urban areas in a way



Comparative study on infill site in Newcastle city centre.

Top: Current UDP standards provide 12 residential units and one corner retail unit. Above: Car-free urbanism provides 45 residential units and improved environment.

which maintains urban quality" (DETR *Planning for Communities of the Future* white paper 1998 p9).

High quality is achieved via good design and not based on the application of inflexible standards. Urban design when released from density and parking standards has a significant role in estimating the hidden capacity of urban brownfield sites and reclaiming the city back from the car.

The strength of the SRQ approach is in the qualitative comparative evaluation of schemes working within different policy contexts - one with existing UDP standards, with a relaxation of these standards and the car-free urbanism option raised as an aspiration within PPG3. This evaluation is strengthened by being visual, consistent (so not dependent upon illustrative variations) and contextual, based upon real sites. A fine grained understanding of specific sites does allow for assumptions underlying standards to be challenged. In practice it is resulting in efficiency of land use, a different understanding of land value and a related rise in the interest in brown field developments.

For the sceptics who say it cannot be done within the constraints of the market, particularly outside London, reality is proving otherwise. Alister Hackland (Hackland & Dore Architects, Edinburgh) presented his current 'live' scheme for the UK's first car-free development, based on a 4 storey traditional tenement building form and communal entrances and spaces, situated at Stateford Green in central Edinburgh. Sustainable principles are evident in the physical presence of a district heating link, passive solar gain, embodied energy and construction detailing together with operational considerations dealing with adaptability and flexibility. Avoiding on-site cars is written into tenancy agreements and a condition of sale for purchasers. Delivery and speed of implementation is backed by pro-active support from principal officers and members of Edinburgh City Council and the extension of on-street residents' parking schemes in the wider area.

The challenges posed were to public perceptions of quality and city living; to the planners' and engineers' use of standards; and to housebuilders' role in facilitating brownfield development. However, I'm left with a niggling thought that the first challenge is to the designer to have the courage to become involved in articulating these arguments. #

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