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Bob Giddings and Bill Hopwood

From evangelistic bureaucrat to visionary developer: The changing character of the master plan in Britain

Abstract

This paper contends that the concept of a master plan is deeply embedded in both the theory and practice of town planning in Britain. From the middle of the 20th Century numerous new towns and comprehensive development areas of post war Britain were master planned in an attempt to prescribe land use patterns.

However, the process of generating and implementing these ambitious, large-scale and comprehensive master plans became increasingly difficult in the face of public opposition and erosion of trust in experts; the decline in public sector intervention and the collapse of the property market. As a result, the 1970s and early 1980s saw an unremitting decline in the concept of the master plan as a tool for the development and redevelopment of British cities.

Yet, in the last twenty years there has been a revival in the use of the term but in dramatically altered circumstances as re-assertion of the power and influence of the private sector has changed the nature of these plans. With reference to recent master planning initiatives, this paper explores the changing shape and character of the master planning process in Britain; and assesses if it is an appropriate tool for the 21st Century.

Introduction

In recent years the term master planning has achieved common currency in urban development in Britain. A brief review of planning, development and architecture consultants' websites in Britain and elsewhere, reveals a widespread acceptance of the term and practice of master planning. Indeed, as Jon Rouse, Chief Executive of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) has stated:

More than 1,000 documents purporting to be master plans have landed at CABE's door since our creation five years ago. They have come from planners, surveyors, architects, and urban designers and have ranged from small sets of conceptual drawings seeking to give a place a new identity to dense, technical socio-economic analyses (Rouse, 2004)

The word *purporting* in this quotation is enlightening. Rouse seems to have a clear vision of what master planning should be. In fact he refers to The Urban Task Force definition that a master plan is a three-dimensional strategy exploring how a development will work in the wider urban context. The Task Force went on to describe a process that should be architecture-led but must flow from an integrated team of engineers, hydrologists, landscape architects, surveyors and other relevant professionals (The Urban Task Force, 1999). According to Rouse (2004), such clarity has since dissolved into an eclectic mix of possibilities. In this paper it is argued that the process of master planning has actually been deeply embedded in the traditions and practice of town planning in the UK for more than half a century. The attitudes, approaches and relative influence of the professionals involved may have changed, and the nature of the private-public sector relationship may have altered in balance. Nevertheless the proposition is that there is nothing particularly new in the present love affair with master planning, in that it remains a powerful top-down approach; and communities may continue to struggle against the private sector imposing specific land use proposals, as they had with the public sector determinism after 1945 (Grant, 1982).

World War II changed attitudes and in many countries there was a commitment to social welfare and reform. The expectation that a modern people's Britain would rise out of the ashes, resulted in the election of the nearest Britain has ever had to a Socialist Government, which greatly increased the role of the state. Planning in urban policy was greatly strengthened with a raft of legislation. According to Hall (1992), all development plans coming after the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act could be termed part of the master plan era. The 1950s master plan was the characteristic instrument of land use regulation (Faludi and Waterhout 2002). The outlook was much wider than the architecture of individual buildings or even a district, as the plans included a clean-sweep approach of either widespread clearance of huge areas of cities or building new towns on greenfield sites (Healey, 1998; Taylor, 1998; Wong 1998).

Master Planning in the 1960s

Master plans became even more popular in the 1960s but the notion of public accountability was a mirage. While local government officers conceived the plans, it was mainly private sector developers and contractors who put the plans into action. Cities across Britain carried out wholesale rebuilding of their centres. Coventry, Bristol, Plymouth, Southampton, Birmingham, Leicester, Leeds and Newcastle were some of the cities that had major urban rebuilding plans. This was partly to reconstruct from war damage but also included the removal of many existing buildings and spaces from the city centre. The plans included substantial areas of clearance and larger buildings. There was a high priority on ease of road transport, which often resulted in breaking a city into separate blocks or cells surrounded by new road networks with segregation of pedestrians from vehicles based on the ideas of the Buchanan Report (1963).

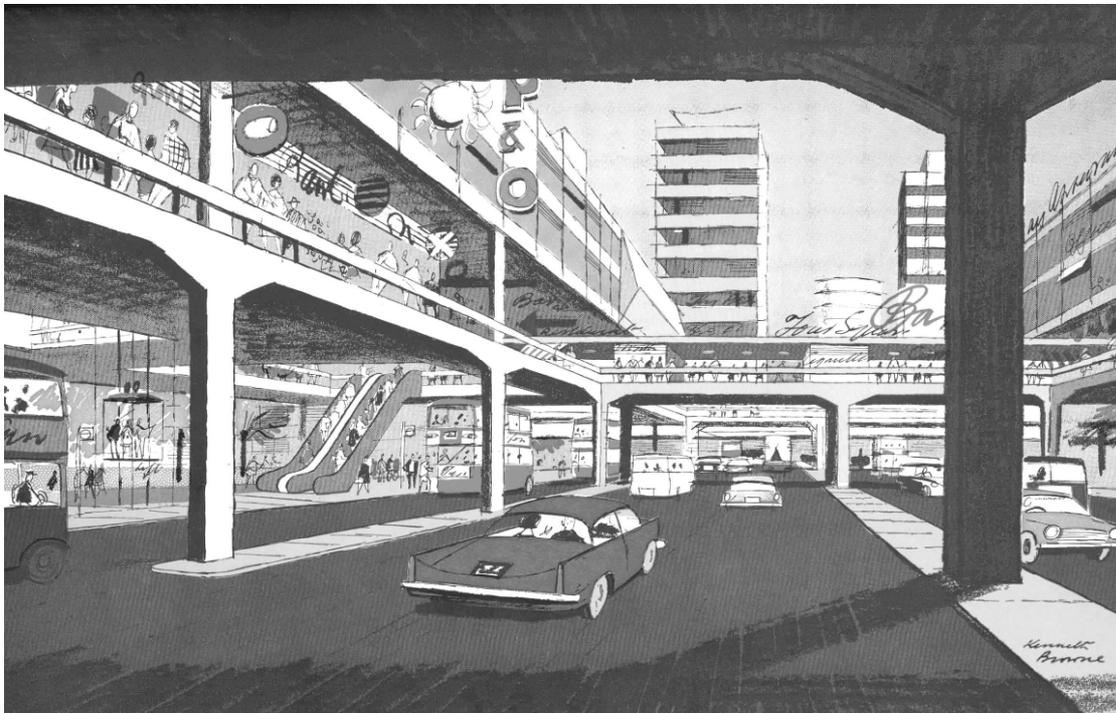


Figure 1: Scheme for complete redevelopment from the Buchanan Report 1963

For example the plan for Newcastle upon Tyne (Burns, 1967) included the widespread demolition of the city centre, with large internal malls, a massive motorway programme with three north-south routes and three east-west routes, the city centre ringed by car parks and pedestrian walkways above the ground. Even early in the decade of the 1960s, there had been concerns about the routine use of master plans in British cities. Many residents pointed to the inhuman buildings, impersonal streets and damage to the fabric of urban life. Some commentators noted that the growth of car traffic and the plans for a mass of urban motorways, cutting through the fabric of cities and communities, were damaging to social connections and the vitality of cities (Mumford, 1961; Appleyard, 1981). Others explained that zoning by function was destroying variety and mixed use, which are vital to urban life

(Jacobs, 1961). It was pointed out that cities were losing their distinctive features, recognisable landmarks and areas that create a sense of place (Lynch, 1960); and that planners and developers were increasingly ignoring the natural environment and causing harm to it (McHarg, 1969). There were also criticisms of the elitist, top-down approach that did not connect with people's needs and hopes. The concentration on physical building, assuming that changing the physical environment would improve social conditions, often meant that the existing social networks were ignored (Young & Wilmott, 1957). Yet the experts believed that they knew best and the planners, architects and politicians displayed a kind of arrogance towards ordinary people (Taylor, 1998). Not surprisingly, criticism started to grow. However, as one Newcastle planner put it:

You've got to have a touch of arrogance to be a planner – and a basic confidence to know that you're right even when everyone else is saying that you're wrong. (quoted in Davies, 1972)

Davies' book, engagingly entitled 'The Evangelistic Bureaucrat', was a vicious and articulate attack upon the 'top-down' master planning of Rye Hill in Newcastle, which was characterised by the planners' belief that they alone understood what was best for the area.

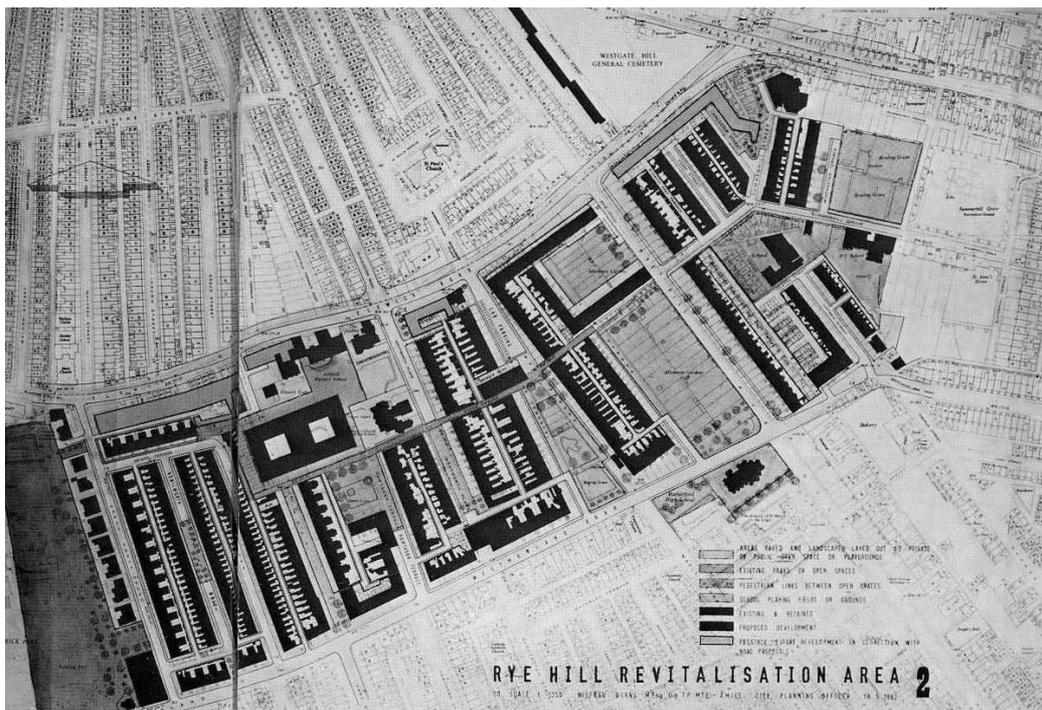


Figure 2: Master plan for Rye Hill, Newcastle upon Tyne

As well as the expression of concern about the results of master planning from those outside the professions, within planning there was a growing disquiet. Brown (1966) explained that cities are not fixed and static, but rather they are constantly changing. He proposed that planning should be a process that encompasses change, which master plans did not. Alexander (1965) emphasised that cities have complex networks and myriad connections rather than a simple hierarchy of cells. McLoughlin

(1969) produced a systems approach to planning. He argued that as a city is a system, planners need knowledge of how a specific city works, with an understanding of its interconnections and dynamics including economic and social factors (Taylor, 1998). In contrast to master plans, with their rigid proposals for a desired end state, systems planning outlined objectives and alternative ways of reaching them. Master planning was based on a simple linear sequence, while process planning aimed to compare alternatives, with continuous monitoring and feedback (Hall, 1992). Despite the criticisms, regulation of land use remained the primary objective and the resulting zoning policies progressively weakened the diversity of city centres and neighbourhoods. The process was also fuelled by major economic forces that planners were unable to control. In spite of claims about social concern, master planning was dominated by an emphasis on building and re-development, which actually ignored social issues and existing communities. There were thirty-four post-war New Towns master planned in Britain by 1970; and crime, racism and mental illness were as endemic in them as in the re-developed traditional centres (Powell, 2000).

One important aspect was that planners never had the opportunity to implement a radical change in social policy. Ironically during this period of state control, much of the land remained in private ownership and many decisions were taken by the private sector. While master plans could be used to stop or delay what were considered unsuitable developments, as guardians of the built environment their authors had little power to actually initiate development.

The stories about corruption are now legendary but the overwhelming desire for comprehensive re-development was creating other negative impacts on British cities. Local Authorities had been so keen to sign-up their private sector partners to enact the master plans that they often agreed to poor terms. One of the conditions was long-term options, in some cases for many years. Master plans are deterministic concepts that require completion to be effective in any way. The collapse of the property market in the early 1970s left a multitude of these plans incomplete. While it was common knowledge that they would never be finished, the developers maintained their options – effectively stagnating huge areas of British cities. In Newcastle upon Tyne, the All Saints Comprehensive Development Area was designated by the Council with the intention of bringing large-scale office development to the city's historic Quayside (City and County of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1963). Three office blocks were completed in the early 1970s, but the vast majority of the scheme was deferred because of the adverse economic situation. The legal agreement did not expire until 1985, but by 1981 even the Council publicly admitted that it was extremely unlikely that the scheme would ever be progressed (City of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1981). Thus a significant area of the city was blighted for more than twenty years.

Community Planning

As many grandiose schemes of the 1960s were abandoned following the oil crisis and subsequent collapse of the property market, opposition to state-led master planning turned to anger (Nicholson, 1990). During the 1970s master plans seemed like an irrelevance and faded from use as new projects became considerably smaller in scale, and conservation started to be adopted as a viable alternative to new build. The Skeffington report (Department of Environment, 1969) was a modest urging for more consultation with the public in planning processes. A stronger reaction to widespread demolition was the growing call for a real public involvement in planning (Arnstein, 1969). Community Planning depends on the notion that local people should be organized, and by definition this could not be done by public sector officers. Thus it was inevitable that the people who became involved, were very likely to believe in some radical mission to raise people's consciousness. In the officially sponsored community development projects in the 1970s, this led to serious conflict between community teams and local councils, which hastened the demise of the experiment. In many other situations, a great variety of semi-official and unofficial groups became central to many projects (Hall, 1992). One of the best known projects to benefit from a more bottom-up approach was Coin Street on London's South Bank. Community Planning did not just mean improved consultation mechanisms but more fundamentally it gave people power over their own lives. From the late 1970s to mid 1980s, the planned development of riverside office blocks, partially aimed at increasing the local tax base, was transformed into proposals for houses, commercial buildings, riverside walk, park and other recreational uses (Nicholson, 1990). Conflict between community groups and planners started to occur more regularly, as people were no longer willing to accept the planners' claim to unique wisdom (Hall, 1992). Once the groups realised that they could challenge the system, they seemed to regard it as their duty to do so. The paradox was that there was increasing argument over minimal development.

Speaking in July 1980 at the Royal Institute of British Architects, Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for the Environment expressed an interest in architectural competitions as a means of releasing the tensions between planners and the public. There had been competitions for building design since the 19th century (Giddings & Horne, 2002) but Heseltine's vision was much broader. In fact he was proposing that architectural competitions could be used to re-plan large areas of cities. A number of experiments were undertaken including the Green Giant development site on London's South Bank. The Conservative Government had not foreseen that the planning implications would be fraught with difficulties from the beginning. The concept seemed to lose its attraction for them, and government faded from the scene (Thornley, 1991). However, it enhanced the notion that architects and developers could become involved in planning areas of a city, and initiated the concept of a visually based master plan.

The Thatcher Government elected in 1979, had an ideology of rolling back the state and cutting red tape in planning. They used the perceived failure of master planning

ie unpopular tower blocks, unattractive town centres and shopping centres - to support dramatic changes by liberating the whole planning system (Department of the Environment, 1985). Post-war planning had a concern for social well-being and was based on the idea of cooperation between public agencies and the private sector. A major weakness in Thatcherism was its disdain for democracy and participation at the local level. As an increasing number of activities were taken out of local authority control and located in the market place, it became difficult for local authority planners to play any land use balancing or co-ordination role (Thornley, 1991).

The Rebirth of Master Planning

In the early 1980s, master plans were hardly ever mentioned in Britain, but as early as 1979, the intent for London and Liverpool Docklands had been announced, and the initiative enshrined in legislation (Department of the Environment, 1981). The Act enabled the Secretary of State to designate parts of any city as urban development areas and urban development corporations were introduced to manage these areas. Thus local authorities in any designated area, started to lose control over implementation of planning policy and the strategic authority lost its power of direction over major applications. A principal consequence in planning terms was that the new corporations subsumed all the powers formerly exercised by the various authorities at borough, district and strategic level (Grant, 1982). In addition, the corporations were given the power to assemble land, reclaim it, service it, develop it themselves or dispose of it to private developers (Department of the Environment, 1981). The post-1947 planning system had been effectively bypassed in urban development corporation areas. Central government had usurped local government, which was perceived as unwilling to carry out the kind of private sector led redevelopment that the Thatcher Government had envisaged (Ambrose, 1986). Thus regeneration of significant areas of traditional cities in Britain was determined by government appointed boards, mainly originating in the private sector and accountable directly to the Secretary of State. These boards also had the discretion to judge how much they informed the public or consulted with local authorities and local organisations (Thornley, 1991). The outcome was that community groups and planners who had argued over small-scale developments during most of the 1970s, were now all excluded from a new form of private sector top-down process. This was not a minority activity. Thirteen urban development corporations were in operation by 1993 (Imrie & Thomas, 1993) and a number have been designated since. Thus the Thatcherite policy that established urban development corporations became the catalyst for the return of large scale planning and master plans in particular. The development corporations had similar powers of compulsory purchase to local authorities, but they also had large budgets with which to realise the plans. One of the principles of this version of urban regeneration was to encourage the private property developers to reverse the picture of decline (Davies, 1998). As traditional industries failed, cities were left with apparently empty wastelands around their cores, particularly in former dockland areas (Powell, 2000). It was mainly these areas that were designated for regeneration by the development corporations. However, it was not as simple as that, because these areas not only included derelict land but also existing homes and businesses. The Tyne and Wear Development Corporation approach to Newcastle's East Quayside swept away existing people and workplaces

and replaced them by a dramatic new development favouring rich individuals and powerful corporations. Even Procter and Gamble, one of the city's most successful companies, was forced to leave its premises in favour of legal practices, accountants and an international hotel group (Greenhalgh, 2000). The master plan appeared superficially more palatable by its new style pictorial three-dimensional vision for the area, rather than the two-dimensional diagrams that had been so familiar in the 1960s, but the effect on the community was little different from Rye Hill.

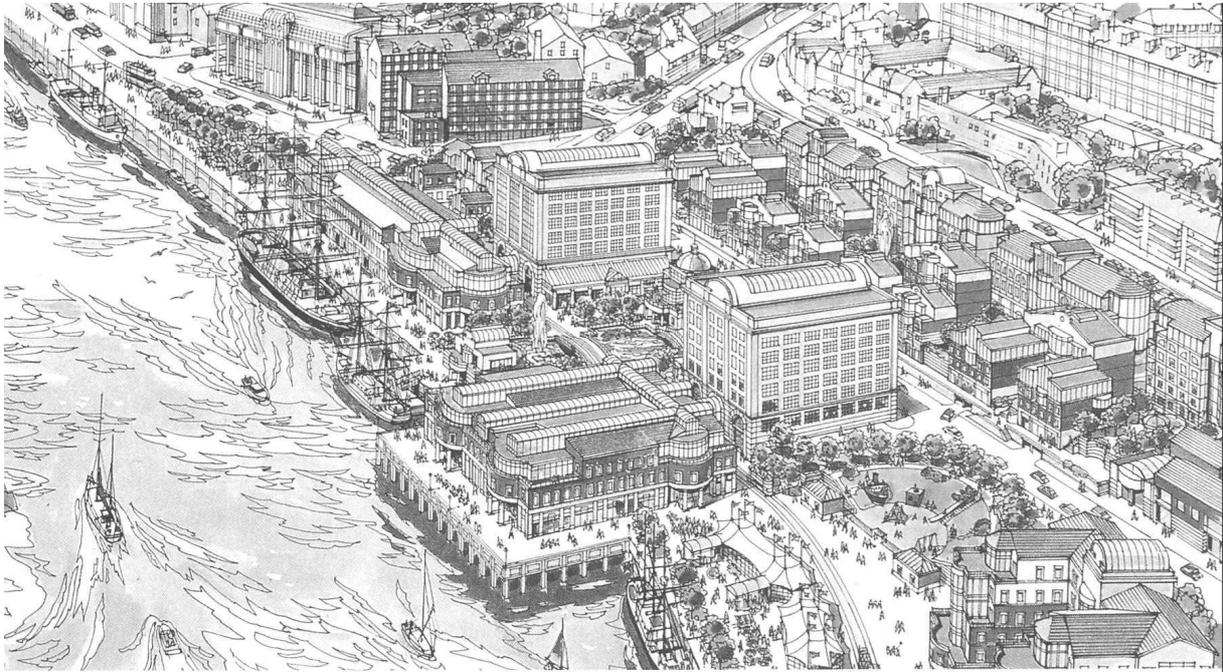


Figure 4: Three dimensional pictorial master plan – East Quayside, Newcastle upon Tyne, by Terry Farrell and Partners for Tyne and Wear Development Corporation

Once accepted as a technique for planning in urban development corporation areas, architect and developer led, three-dimensional master plans soon became common currency. As the development corporations came to the end of their designated periods, a multitude of master planned proposals were on offer all over Britain, including: Stokley Park, Uxbridge by Arup Associates in 1986; Poundbury Dorset by Leon Krier in 1988; King's Cross, London by Terry Farrell and Partners in 1987 and by Foster and Partners in 1987; Paternoster Square, London by Richard Rogers and Partners in 1987, Arup Associates in 1987 and Terry Farrell and Partners in 1989; Wellington Avenue, Aldershot by Terry Farrell and Partners in 1997; Kingston University by Todd Architects in 1998; Swindon by Urbaneye in 2000; Newcastle Going for Growth by Richard Rogers and Partners in 2000; World Squares for All by Foster and Partners in 2000; Cambridge by DEGW in 2001. Large scale master planned urban regeneration projects were back on the agenda.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, master planning is wide spread. Of the 130 practices on the Urban Design Group's website index (undated), over half claim an expertise in master planning. At present, almost all major developments are based on a master plan. There are now master plans for public spaces, single buildings and even parts of historic sites, large residential areas, city centres and new towns.

The new style master plans had metamorphosed into three-dimensional detailed illustrations, linked to the importance of image and fund raising. First, the master plans were to provide a vision of what the place could be like. This is often in contrast to the present character of an area that is perceived as run down and dilapidated. Much of the new master planning is for prestige property developments. In all of these, appearance is important. There is a growing belief in development that cities are centres of consumption and tourism rather than centres for living and working. This has been fed by claims that the city is a product with image as a key feature rather than cities being about activities and processes (Faludi & Waterhout, 2002). These views encourage the use of master plans and their role in generating funds for development. By their nature, they are produced by professionals; some would say experts, which continues the theme of top-down urban management.

The switch from planner to architect as lead professional is interesting. This is partly a result of decline in public sector planning, and partly due to the nature of the illustrations and the importance of visual communication. As master plans have become more visionary, they have become more self-contained and abstracted from the urban settings that they are supposed to enhance (Rouse, 2004). Despite the growing number of three-dimensional representations, there is more than a hint that activities are still being considered as two dimensional patterns. Moreover, the footprint of single use activity is remaining relatively large. The more that master plans become detailed representations of specific proposals, the more they become deterministic and inflexible. There is no doubt that master planning is aimed at the scheme as product rather than the city in process. It is a broad brush technique covering not just the location, and sometimes design of individual buildings, but the layout of the site, transport infrastructure, the spaces between buildings, the overall design style and land uses. This can produce coarse-grained structures and large static buildings on their independent plots of land. It is unusual to find any existing structures or activities retained as part of the scheme (Faludi & Waterhout, 2002). In fact master planning has become a tool of property-led urban regeneration. It is for all these reasons that Jon Rouse declared that the clarity of the master plan as a three-dimensional strategy exploring how a development will work in the wider urban context has since dissolved into an eclectic mix of possibilities (Rouse, 2004). In addition, evidence is starting to accumulate to suggest this approach actually creates very little in terms of new activities, employment and support for the local economy. It appears that the most significant outcome of property-led regeneration is that existing businesses move around seeking better premises and preferable financial arrangements (Greenhalgh, 2000).

Alternatives

The focus for urban design is now clearly back on existing cities. In this context, utopias have a very limited role and natural models would seem more appropriate as a means of creating distinctive and sustainable places. Some observers state a preference for a neighbourhood scale with social, environmental and economic plans as well as a public realm spatial element (Allen, 2001). A number of regeneration teams have become sceptical of any plan that may prioritise spatial planning at the

expense of economic, social and cultural concerns (Editorial, Architects Journal, 2001). From his experience, Farrell now concludes that a process of reassessment, adjustment and reappraisal is necessary, and that may involve strategies rather than plans (Williams, 2001). It has been established that cities are contested places and community strategies are better able to allow public involvement in decisions. After all, it is the citizens who live, work and find recreation in the city.

Frames of Reference, Frameworks and Design Guides have been used for some large regeneration programmes such as Glasgow from mid 1980s, Birmingham from the late 1980s to the present, and the Temple Bar area of Dublin from the early 1990s. Healey (1998) states that frameworks are articulate views about how places may change over the long term. They aim to address the quality of life in an integrated way; attempting to weave together economic, social, environmental and physical dimensions of what makes up a place. As each city is a unique system, with a maze of connections, a change in one area will affect others. To deal with the dynamics and interconnections of a specific city, urban designers and planners need knowledge of the city and a flexible approach rather than static master plans (Taylor, 1998). The Urban Design Group offers different levels of urban design guidance related to specific places. In its view an urban design framework should provide the broad principles for an area. A development brief would then give detailed guidance for a specific site (Urban Design Group, 2001)

Gratz and Mintz (1998) argue that it is better to have a myriad of small actions, a policy of urban husbandry rather than project planning. Davies (1998) proposes that areas in cities need on-going design advice, not episodic interventions. Frampton, Professor of Architecture at Columbia University, recommends judicious intervention rather than the utopian scope of the master plan as this would be more beneficial to the urban fabric (Billingham, 2001). Cities already have natural rich networks of vibrant activities, vital to urban life.

Conclusions

The revival of master planning as a vehicle for securing urban regeneration raises a number of issues which impact upon both the processes of regeneration and the role of the professionals involved. The usual strategy is to have new large master planned complexes often for retail or leisure. However the benefits of such actions are questionable, especially when compared with the many costs, both the money spent on their construction and the loss of small businesses, social networks and sense of place.

The changing character of the master planning approach raises other issues relating to the role of the planner. The profession historically claimed to possess the expert knowledge and skills necessary for the art and science of ordering the use of land and buildings, and for a significant part of the 20th century, some variety of master planning was regarded as a key part of the planners' toolkit. The plans for the new towns and the redevelopment of urban centres in the post war years were part of their strategy to improve living conditions; and as Davies (1972) and others have suggested, this often led to planners adopting an all-knowing evangelical approach. Yet, the master planning of the late 20th and early 21st century is the tool of the architect and developer-led integrated team. The master plan has changed hands but not necessarily changed its purpose. Terry Farrell, one of the biggest supporters of master planning, has stated that it is simply a way of stating desired outcomes and setting out to achieve them in physical terms (Williams, 2001). Nevertheless, public sector master planning had little room for negotiation (Taylor, 1998) or the community (Wates, 2000) and the revival of master planning in the private sector, has not even attempted to address these issues. According to Nicholson (1990), both state-led and market-led master planning solutions lack integrity. The first treats the city as a greenfield site and the second views it as a commodity. In both models, citizens are marginalised spectators – consumers rather than participants. Both are forms of top-down decision making. Others have been more damning in their criticism. Alsop (2001) makes the final points about master planning:

It implies that it was done by a master, or acts as a blueprint or matrix to be filled-in. Often this path ... leads to ... wrecking an existing town centre. The practices that indulge in these consultancy activities must stop before they destroy the lives of many of the ordinary people in this country. Every year, millions of pounds of public money is squandered on master planning studies, undertaken by urban design pirates.

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