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# The evolutionary ‘waves’ of place-shaping: pre, during and post recession

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## Abstract

This paper is concerned with the evolution of place-shaping over the past decade or so and its potential future direction, specifically relating to a UK context but with varying aspects of resonance internationally. The methodological approach and empirical originality is derived from practitioner encounters synthesised with theory. Three ‘waves’ of place-shaping are discernable: *renaissance*, *recession mitigation* and *recovery*. Conceptualising and examining the changing face of place-shaping practice, some broad place quality trends are identified. Asserting that renaissance interventions were heavily skewed towards enhancing the material aspects of city spaces it is suggested that recessions provide a useful interject to reflect on past practice, rethink future policies and sharpen skills. It is within such a climate that innovatory practice can flourish as (public, private and community) actors are challenged to seek alternative ways of working. Questioning the wisdom of *cuts in quality*, the paper calls for new ways of capturing place quality.

**Key words:** *place-shaping, regeneration, urban renaissance, place quality, economic recovery.*

## Introduction

The repercussions of the recent global credit crisis and the consequent austerity measures that many governments around the world are pursuing make for ‘interesting times’, to borrow some practitioner parlance. Concomitantly, a Coalition Government secured national political leadership in the UK in May, 2010, that has resulted in the palingenesis of some policy

strains relating to the shaping of places and the revocation of other policy directives. The result is a radical shift in the ways that places are governed, funded and managed. For the purpose of this paper the embracing notion of ‘place-shaping’ is utilised. Since the *Lyons Inquiry into Local Government*,<sup>1</sup> ‘place-shaping’ has found favour with practitioners, academics, politicians and public officials across the UK and Europe,<sup>2</sup> at least in terms of its adoption in everyday policy speak,<sup>3</sup> yet the term is not new.<sup>4,5</sup> Involving a diffuse array of actors and organisational constellations,<sup>6</sup> it is necessary to first conceptualise the practice of place-shaping.

Distinct from professionalised specialisms, which can lead to silo working arrangements, the notion of place-shaping is applied in this paper in a manner that unites professional agents, community actors and business interests who are actively and less actively engaged in the emergent field of town and city management. Indeed, the practice and professionalisation of town and city management is developing from an operational activity into more strategic ventures,<sup>7-9</sup> which finds favour with adopting the holistic – yet understandably nebulous – concept of place-shaping. Whether qualified planners, town centre wardens, accredited surveyors, retailers, street cleaners or destination managers – each are willing actors in the pursuit of shaping *their* place, but tend to pursue diverse goals. These goals are not always complementary or congruent as modes of working are framed in different ways, influenced by socio-culturally distinct understandings and interpretations of ‘what place-shaping is’. It is in this sense that Allen and Crookes identified and problematised the alignment of professionalised views (and practices) with those held by ‘ordinary’ residents. Further, they argued that there is a tendency for ‘dominant’ views to be imposed on ‘dominated’ communities.<sup>10</sup>

The ‘sphere of influence’ of place-shaping stretches from a tightly defined urban area, such as that covered by a Business Improvement Area or District that is local,<sup>8</sup> to a waterfront, entire city, region, nation or a larger spatial terrain, such as the European Union.<sup>11</sup> It is thus a concept pertinent across scales, but with different place-specific practical permutations owing to the precise spatial frame adopted. Perhaps the mutability of the theory and practice of place-shaping, in terms of refuting a single-lens view, lacking universal criteria or an inability to pin it down with definitional precision, is why it is such a potentially powerful and useful concept. By erasing the debilitating traditional professional divides and antagonistic public-private-community demarcations, the place-shaping concept highlights the connections,

commonalities and intersects amongst different participants in the shaping of places.<sup>4</sup> It is an approach to service delivery that seeks to blend social, economic, environmental and cultural aspirations in a sustainable manner that meets the needs of the broader community,<sup>3</sup> as distinct from developing solely for profitably. Place-shaping can therefore be understood as a democratic endeavour. As Gallent and Wong articulate, place-shaping is ‘a shared endeavour, influencing production flows and delivering outcomes, but also doing so in a way that is sensitive to the peculiarities of place and the diverse aspirations of communities’ (Pg 358).<sup>5</sup>

Real life is ephemeral: you cannot play it back. A CD can reproduce ‘perfect’ sound or the TV a perfect image, yet *the live*, whether walking down the street or going to an event, adds qualitatively different experiences including, for example, a sense of occasion rather than pure consumption, or of public engagement rather than private indulgence.<sup>12</sup> The purposeful and less purposeful process of shaping places engages with the lived (social) dimension of being in place,<sup>13</sup> and thus, steps back from (but not completely outside of) technocratic regulations and systems. It is the processual property of ‘place-shaping’ that distinguishes it from ‘place-making’, which is arguably more deterministic and focussed on the end-product. Recognising the interrelations between process and product, the act of plan *shaping* is perhaps more pertinent than that of plan *drafting* and plan *making*. Based on this theorisation of place-shaping, place quality can be viewed as the supportive tissue: more than a backdrop to life experiences, but an active component. Place quality is a constituent factor in the shaping of places that enriches social experiences and economic interactions.

This paper is concerned with the evolution of place-shaping over the past decade or so, specifically relating to a UK context but with varying aspects of resonance internationally. The methodological approach and empirical originality is derived from the author’s practitioner encounters and understandings over the past decade, including stints as a civil servant (at the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Government Office for London), quango employee (representing One North East Regional Development Agency), researcher (based at Newcastle University), and more recently a local government officer (serving Durham County Council). These roles have transgressed the professional divides of planning, urban design, regeneration and economic development to offer a unique insight into the recent evolution of place-shaping and its potential future direction. The paper draws on the author’s direct experience negotiating the implementation and management of place-shaping endeavours (e.g. visioning, community participation, deal-making, formal processes, funding

arrangements, political oversight etc.), synthesised with theoretical literature, to discern three ‘waves’ of place-shaping: *renaissance*, *recession mitigation* and *recovery*. Conceptualising and examining the changing face of place-shaping practice, some broad place quality trends are identified. Commencing with a brief review of the UK’s ‘urban renaissance’ agenda since the late 1990s, the paper goes on to examine the changing face of practice brought about by the onset of global economic turmoil in 2007 and more recently the election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government. Asserting that renaissance interventions were heavily skewed towards enhancing the material aspects of city spaces it is suggested that recessions provide a useful interject to reflect on past practice, rethink future policies and sharpen skills. It is within such a climate that innovatory practice can flourish as (public, private and community) actors are challenged to seek alternative ways of working. As the wisdom of *cuts in quality* is questioned, the paper calls for new ways of capturing place quality.

### **New Labour’s ‘urban renaissance’ agenda**

Following persistent decline for a number of decades, UK employment in manufacturing rapidly collapsed during the 1980s; a process of deindustrialisation that unfolded across much of Western Europe and other so-called ‘developed’ countries. Towns and cities bore the brunt of this economic deterioration as they had the highest concentrations of industrial jobs that tended to be located in some of the oldest factories unsuitable for modernisation, and likewise with respect to production techniques and outmoded infrastructure.<sup>14</sup> There was a prevailing view that British towns and cities were ‘run-down and unkempt’,<sup>15</sup> which was mirrored in other countries, such as Germany and the US.<sup>16</sup> Some of those British places considered to be in urgent need of revitalisation, included the former industrial heartlands of the North and Midlands. As Tony Blair’s ‘New’ Labour entered the fray in 1997 they quickly set about reconstituting and rebranding the Thatcher-Major Conservative policy framework of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>17</sup> The Conservative’s place-shaping strategy over this period focussed on a laissez-faire planning approach supporting privatisation and entrepreneurialism through state centralism, including the deployment of state apparatus, such as Urban Development Corporations.<sup>18, 19</sup> A notable spatial implication was the proliferation of ‘big box’ greenfield developments,<sup>20</sup> such as retail parks, which had a less than positive impact on the social life and commercial vitality of more accustomed town and city centres.<sup>21</sup> Signifying a continuation of the Conservative’s neoliberal place-shaping policy but also a departure, New

Labour implemented a place-shaping strategy with a spatial focus on stimulating consumption activities to help revitalise deteriorating urban centres (such place-shaping interventions have been practiced globally. See for example Adelaide,<sup>22</sup> Bangkok<sup>23</sup> and Toronto<sup>24</sup>). Notably, the geography of Labour's spatially discriminate strategy, largely mirrored the former manufacturing areas and industrial heartlands, concentrated in the North and Midlands, reflective of local communities with strong Labour political ties. The political imperatives underpinning Labour's centralised regional approach to the shaping of places were supported by an Urban Task Force chaired by the celebrated 'starchitect'<sup>25</sup> Lord Richard Rogers that brought together a cast of leading British place-shapers. The Task Force published the landmark document; *Towards an Urban Renaissance* in 1999, which proposed over 100 recommendations to improve the future sustainability of urban spaces, and thus quality of life.<sup>15</sup> At the heart of these recommendations was a (European-inspired) vision of:

well designed, compact and connected cities supporting a diverse range of uses – where people live, work and enjoy leisure time at close quarters – in a sustainable urban environment well integrated with public transport and adaptable to change.

Stimulated by project tours to cities, such as Barcelona, the Urban Task Force advocated mixed-uses, increased urban densities and design excellence, which comprised key strands of *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, underpinning what this paper refers to as 'a call for place quality'. Distilling the Urban Task Force's renaissance ambitions is perhaps captured by the 'Mars bar effect' where urban spaces become the centre of 'work, rest and play' (see Lees<sup>26</sup> and Punter<sup>27</sup> for a more detailed review). *Towards an Urban Renaissance* was the report that sought to reveal a path for urban areas to make the journey from an industrial-based economy to a so-called post-industrial spatial economy, where retail,<sup>28,29</sup> culture<sup>30</sup> and knowledge<sup>31,32</sup> were perceived to be some of the principal (place-quality) drivers. The renaissance narrative had a plot supported by evocative descriptors, including 'sustainability', 'diversity' and 'community', but their practical translation was highly contested and implementation fraught with difficulties.<sup>26</sup>

### **The evolutionary 'waves' of UK place-shaping policy (post-1997)**

New Labour's approach to place-shaping was symptomatic of their *Third Way* philosophy:<sup>33-</sup><sup>35</sup> a synthesis of neoliberal imperatives together with democratic state intervention that

espoused to put local communities in the driving seat.<sup>36</sup> These dual agendas and distinct ideologies are potentially complementary, but also contradictory. Indeed the design-led urban renaissance agenda was characterised by an uneasy relationship between neoliberal and neocommunitarian ideals – exchange values versus use values. Depending on one’s social status may dictate whether one views the renaissance brand of place-shaping as a ‘success’, with proponents pointing towards social ‘mixing’ and new designscapes, whilst detractors highlight social ‘cleansing’ and gentrification through the design of exclusive enclaves of consumption or gated development schemes.<sup>37-41</sup> See Table 1 for a summary of the recent evolutionary ‘waves’ of place-shaping policy in the UK.

**Table 1: Evolutionary ‘waves’ of place-shaping policy**

<b>Time scale</b>	<b>1997-2007</b>	<b>2007-2009</b>	<b>2010-*</b>
<b>Policy wave</b>	<i>Renaissance</i>	<i>Recession mitigation</i>	<i>Recovery</i>
<b>Political regime</b>	Labour	Labour	Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition
<b>Policy narrative and descriptors</b>	Urban renaissance; sustainability, diversity and community	Stimulus support; rapid-response teams, re-skilling and access to finance	Big Society; local solutions, permissive policy, incentivised development and enabling enterprise
<b>Political ideology</b>	<i>Third Way corporatism</i>	<i>Keynesianism</i>	<i>Anti-interventionist Localism</i>
<b>Key actors</b>	Local authority-led partnerships QUANGOs	The state Public sector-led partnerships Local authorities QUANGOs	Communities and businesses Local and Sub-Regional Partnerships Local authorities
<b>Scalar modes of working</b>	National Regional Neighbourhood	National Regional Sub-regional	National Sub-regional Local Neighbourhood
<b>Temporal horizon</b>	Longer-term schemes	‘Quick wins’ and short-term projects	Short to medium term
<b>Primary governance entities</b>	Regional Assemblies Local Strategic Partnerships City Regions	Regional Leaders’ Boards City Regions Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs)	Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) Neighbourhood Forums
<b>Delivery vehicles</b>	Urban Regeneration Companies (URCs)	City Development Companies (CDCs)	LEPs Economic Development Companies (EDCs)
<b>Place-shaping enablers</b>	Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) English Partnerships (EP)	RDAs Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)	HCA
<b>Major funding programmes</b>	Single Programme New Deal for Communities (NDC)	Single Programme Working Neighbourhoods Funds (WNF)	Regional Growth Fund (RGF)
<b>Place quality champions</b>	Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) The Academy for	CABE The Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC)	HCA Place-shaping partnerships

	Sustainable Communities (ASC) Regional Centres of Excellence for Sustainable Communities		
<b>Place-shaping innovations</b>	Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and strategic place management operations Design Codes Masterplanning Sustainability tools Design Review Panels	Eco-design Asset-backed regeneration	Community coproduction, service delivery and ownership Tax Increment Financing (TIFs) and other financial instruments Neighbourhood development orders (including community right to build orders)
<b>Successes+</b>	Urban facelifts, place rebranding, flagship regeneration schemes and cultural attractions Mixed-use environments Re-use of brownfield sites and abandoned buildings Shared spaces	Utilising empty-shops for cultural practices and community uses	Incremental design and development more sensitive to local context Community-led place-shaping across well mobilised communities
<b>Failures+</b>	Growing socio-spatial inequalities, partially masked by urban facelifts Delivering sustainable communities, integrated transport hubs and realising mixed communities 'Clone towns' and erosion of spatial distinctiveness Gentrification and displacement of those uses and users deemed to be 'marginal'	Undeliverable regeneration schemes and design visions Mothballed development projects Empty new-build schemes and mixed-use projects with 'unlettable' commercial space	Uncoordinated market-skewed interventions Strategic place-shaping void Business displacement resulting from Enterprise Zone policy NIMBYism – resistance to almost all development across some well mobilised communities Unwanted development disproportionately located in less well mobilised and deprived communities
<b>Broad spatial trends</b>	Design-led regeneration in many town and city centres, exemplified by renaissance of Northern 'core cities' Pullulation of cultural quarters and districts, together with a 'pop-up' craze of galleries, coffee shops, clubs and restaurants in edge-of-centre, waterfronts and former industrial areas of cities	Empty shops and commercial units in urban centres, particularly acute in 'marginal places' Saturation of small city-centre apartments	More pronounced spatial demarcations between the have lots and have nots Urban blandscapes
<b>Policy impact on urban centres</b>	Urban centre living and repopulation Extended spaces of leisure and consumption More temporal variety including evening economy New and reconfigured public spaces Over-managed space	Urban tourist centres supporting 'staycations' Conversion of commercial space for alternative uses Unoccupied ground floor commercial units in supposedly mixed-used developments Zombie sites	More frenzied place competition between neighbouring urban centres Retrenching spaces of leisure and consumption in some urban centres off the tourist and investor radar Diversification of land-uses Rationalising of public sector property portfolios,



			including out-of-centre relocations and provision of shared services
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\* The features of the recovery wave of place-shaping should be viewed tentatively as they subject to change and evolve.

+ Some ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ are interchangeable dependent on one’s situated vantage and value framework.

More recently the policy framework guiding the shaping of places, and in particular urban regeneration, evolved from *renaissance* to *recession mitigation*. Whilst still under the stewardship of a Labour Government, the *Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration* (SNR) laid out a new policy-architecture for stimulating urban competitiveness.<sup>42,43</sup> By way of SNR, Labour set out a key role for Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) (both non-departmental public bodies), alongside local authorities, as each jostled for position in governing and ‘managing’ the shaping of places.<sup>6</sup> But perhaps more importantly, the tumultuous economic climate brought about by the global credit crunch created a situation where mitigating the impacts during a volatile economic downturn was deemed paramount. Arguably, longer-term visions, design consciousness and sustainability factors were significantly marginalised during the 2007 to 2009 economic upheavals as state-led crisis management was the predominant mode of practice. The emphasis on physical ‘flagship’ regeneration schemes<sup>20,44,45</sup> during the renaissance wave promptly shifted to economic (business) and social (people) *Keynesianism* support packages, intended to stimulate demand. The recession mitigation wave of place-shaping can therefore be characterised as being reactive: possessing a shorter-term focus on tackling the symptoms of global economic turmoil and managing the most visible spatial manifestations, such as empty shops and large-scale redundancies. With a Coalition Government taking over the UK political-reins in 2010, an ‘Emergency’ Budget was issued in June 2010; setting out a five-year plan to rebuild (and rebalance) the British economy.<sup>46</sup> Enabling local growth through an incentivised regime underpinned by a determined presumption in favour of economic development is the Coalition’s central objective (see Pugalis<sup>47-49</sup> for further discussion). As a result, whilst the precise nature of the next wave of place-shaping is unclear, it is expected to focus on striving to achieve a sustained economic *recovery*. However, what this may entail is a matter of heated debate and

speculation, see for example Coaffee.<sup>50</sup> It remains to be seen whether the Coalition's brand of place-shaping will be associated with their declared *anti-interventionist Localism* political ideology (often expressed through the 'Big Society' idiom). The Big Society concept espouses a move away from 'big government' and central control towards locally targeted services delivered by communities themselves. State 'seed' funding is intended to unleash a mosaic of local action through partnership working and cooperatives,<sup>51</sup> although the practical application of this theory is likely to prove challenging, particularly in the context of sizeable public funding cuts exceeding 25 percent.<sup>52</sup> More critical interpretations of the Big Society consider it to be a smokescreen for privatisation, and the concomitant dismantling of the public sector and withdrawal of state support.

### **The changing face of UK place-shaping practice**

Whilst many of the Urban Task Force's recommendations were never realised, acted upon or implemented,<sup>53</sup> their design-led 'quality counts' stance had a noticeable impact on the shaping of UK cities and city spaces, including:

- 'Brownfield' site redevelopment and urban densification
- Public realm and streetscape enhancements
- Provision of new urban public spaces
- The repopulating of city centres with residents, tourists and consumers
- Public transport and infrastructure investment
- Leveraging greater amounts of private capital
- Iconic development, cultural attractions and mixed-use schemes

Many Northern – former industrial – cities provide tangible 'evidence' of such an urban renaissance, or at least in the case of their public facing city centres, gateway sites and other choice places. It is a renaissance that Lees describes as 'medicine for urban malaise'.<sup>26</sup> Notable examples include the 'core cities' of Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool (see Figure 1). The latter, for example, has undergone the type of renaissance advocated by the Urban Task Force leading the Core Cities Working Group to proclaim that 'Our Cities are Back'.<sup>54</sup> Yet, whilst many of these urban makeovers delivered a diverse range of *uses*, enhanced placed quality and often pioneered innovative designs, some, as in the case of the *Liverpool*

One place-shaping scheme, privatised space and along with it eroded local distinctiveness. In doing so, some would argue that the diversity of *users* has been cleansed along with the buildings and urban social space (see, for example, Minton).<sup>37</sup> The result is a remarkable air of *sameness*, often curtailing some rights to the city (i.e. use) in favour of others (i.e. exchange). The streetscapes (see Figure 2), shopping malls, public art (see Figure 3), retailers, entertainment and dancing fountains, which are almost *de rigueur* (see Figure 4), may project cleanliness, comfort and security; providing the feeling that one is ‘close to home’ due to internationally recognised retailers, branding and symbols. More depressingly, however, many of these new and reconfigured urban spaces are designing-in homogeneity and managing-out urbanity. It is in this sense that the UK’s renaissance wave of place-shaping has saddled many towns and cities with an urban aesthetic remarkably similar to other international ‘competitors’.

**Figure 1. Liverpool’s city centre renaissance**



Figure 2. A shopping district in Stockton emblematic of the renaissance wave



**Figure 3. Archetypical urban renaissance public art, Blackpool**



**Figure 4. Dancing fountains, Sunderland: an example of the UK's contemporary design fascination with urban water-features**



The UK's espoused urban renaissance took place in the 'good times'; riding on the cusp of urban prosperity and macroeconomic stability. Renaissance schemes during this period (1997-2007) tended to be:

- Speculative, due to easy credit conditions with financing readily available on the open market
- Skewed to the needs and desires of consumers and an image-conscious consumer-based and experiential economy, which led to an explosion in the development of new infrastructure such as stadiums, venues, convention centres and hotels
- Supported by generous public financial support (i.e. state aid), including 'gap' funding, site remediation, investment in infrastructure and public realm improvements, together with other 'sunk' costs

So during the good times; developers, investors and speculators were actively encouraged by way of public policy-inducements to cherry-pick spaces of foremost (commercial) choice to reshape, which are now hailed as beacons that an urban renaissance *was* delivered. Similar trends were apparent across many other ‘advanced’ and ‘developing’ countries, particularly those cities attempting to rebrand, such as Oslo, where the opening of its iconic Opera House in 2008 has provided a cultural anchor and national symbol.<sup>55,56</sup> Yet it is worth noting that many renaissance programmes tended to be socio-spatially discriminatory,<sup>40,41</sup> opportunistic,<sup>16,27,57</sup> and security conscious.<sup>38,58</sup> Often ‘over-managed’ spaces of consumption, liable to ‘mange-out’ non-consumers; renaissance interventions were heavily skewed towards enhancing the material aspects of places, frequently to the profuse neglect of social considerations.

Emerging in late 2007 – with what began as a local phenomenon in the US sub-prime mortgage market – the ‘credit crunch’ subsequently impacted the *real* economy on a global scale. Whilst the affects have been variable, few places across the world were unscathed. Impacts were particularly pronounced in some European countries, such as, Ireland, Portugal and Greece, with each requiring ‘bail-outs’ from organisations including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank. Whereas in the US, despite the nationalisation of some credit institutions (e.g. ‘Fannie Mae’ and ‘Freddie Mac’ mortgage companies), approaching 1 million households were grappling with the foreclosure process towards the end of 2009.

In the final quarter of 2009, the UK emerged from the grips of its worst recession since the 1920s, which had inflicted a whole host of socio-economic ramifications, including rising unemployment and homelessness, fuel poverty and significant business closures, each with pronounced spatial implications.<sup>59</sup> Although economists cautiously pointed to signs of an emergent economic recovery in 2010, more peripheral places, including many of the former industrial heartlands, are expected to take much longer to return to the economic highs of mid-2007. In terms of place quality, many areas are pockmarked by ‘zombie sites’ – dilapidated, disused and with a negative residual value and thus little scope for delivery – that act as urban detractors (see Figure 5). In many respects, zombie sites are visual indicators that an urban renaissance was only ever partially implemented. The frequency of zombie sites also provides clues as to the spatiality of the urban renaissance wave of place-shaping and its discriminatory tendencies. Whilst zombie sites can be identified across many urban areas,

they are predominantly located in the UK's de-industrialised places. Yet, these sites pale in significance compared to the ghost towns, characteristic across some new-build residential estates in Ireland,<sup>60</sup> and wholesale urban abandonment across some US towns and neighbourhoods.<sup>61</sup>

**Figure 5. A 'Zombie' site in a Northern town centre**





At the onset of the 2010s, the good times of the UK's urban renaissance years were a distant memory. The unsustainable pre-2007 development model was exposed by the global credit crunch with viability called into question on many potential schemes due to:

- Significantly less money being lent; lower loan-to-value rates and high interest rates
- Less risks being taken by the private sector; adopting a risk aversion stance
- Public sector resource contraction, and the termination or depletion of funding streams

Consequently, the place-shaping sector – including urban designers, place managers, planners, developers, retailers and marketers – operates in a new (financial) environment where the risks are higher and returns reduced. This is impacting on the ability to complete current projects, to realise projects in the pipeline and to bring forward new schemes.<sup>62</sup> As a result, some UK communities have been saddled with zombie sites and ‘mothballed’ development schemes (see Figure 6) rather than the renaissance visions that were vigorously marketed during the preceding decade to help rebrand and, thus, reposition places.

Distinguishing between *visionary*, *guiding* and *binding* styles of masterplans,<sup>63</sup> it is clear that many visionary plans are now unrealisable and binding plans lack the flexibility needed to implement in a tougher fiscal climate. Some guiding masterplans may retain merit over the next decade, although it is anticipated that phasing, funding and delivery aspects will require radical recalibration. Even consumption landscapes of spectacle and ‘economies of fascination’, such as Dubai and Las Vegas, have been forced to stop and pause in respect of the implementation of some of their planned megaprojects. In Las Vegas, for example, Schmid<sup>64</sup> noted the plummeting of building permits by 85 percent following the global economic crisis, which coincided with rising unemployment and declining numbers of tourists, whereas in Dubai, droves of migrant workers left the city as jobs, particularly in the construction and leisure sector, were cut.

**Figure 6. A mothballed housing development scheme**



## **New financial models and place-shaping strategies**

The (pre-credit crunch) renaissance wave of place-shaping was financed on the back of cheap credit, rapidly rising land values and high-density residential development, with demand for commercial and residential development driven by rapid employment expansion (albeit skewed by additional public sector jobs). The recession wave was exclusively focussed on immediate mitigation and managing the fallout. The recovery wave will undoubtedly be different; but different in what ways?

Whilst it is unclear how new financial models will be structured in precise terms, it is apparent that pre-credit crunch renaissance strategies are no longer economically viable or sustainable. Shaping places for recovery, in a UK context, is likely to be driven by a requirement to ‘rebalance’ the economy in terms of private sector enterprise.<sup>65</sup> Such investment strategies may target a broader mix of locations than was apparent during the renaissance wave and may necessitate different aesthetic, spatial and functional requirements. Whereas renaissance projects tended to be ‘attention grabbing’ or ‘transformational’ with a preference for city centre, edge-of-centre, riverside and other choice locations, the recovery wave of place-shaping is anticipated to be more prudent and less ostentatious (particularly due to the retrenchment of UK state support) (see Table 1). Whether the recovery wave will favour alternative designs and different geographies remains speculative at the time of writing. Nevertheless, the evolution of place-shaping creates significant challenges for towns and cities, especially those which the urban renaissance all too fleetingly passed-by; to reinvent, redesign and rejuvenate themselves in future years. The implications for place-shapers, and town and city managers more specifically, are direct. As capital and revenue resources become increasingly scarce, securing investment and sustainable income streams will become more demanding.<sup>9, 66</sup> With traditional markets, in a geographic and consumption sense, continuing to diversify, more conventional places of socio-cultural life (i.e. town and city centres) are set to face intensified competition. Conventional places may thus need to diversify. This may involve finding new uses for unsuitable commercial space, utilising existing space more effectively through multifunctional and multitemporal activities, and enriching the ‘offer’ beyond purely consumption pursuits. An *anti-interventionist Localism* agenda, as propounded by the UK’s Coalition Government, could, for example, encourage the ‘Big Society’ reclamation of commodified space: reintroducing more civic and quotidian cultural activities back in the city. Small victories, spatial tactics and insurgent community-

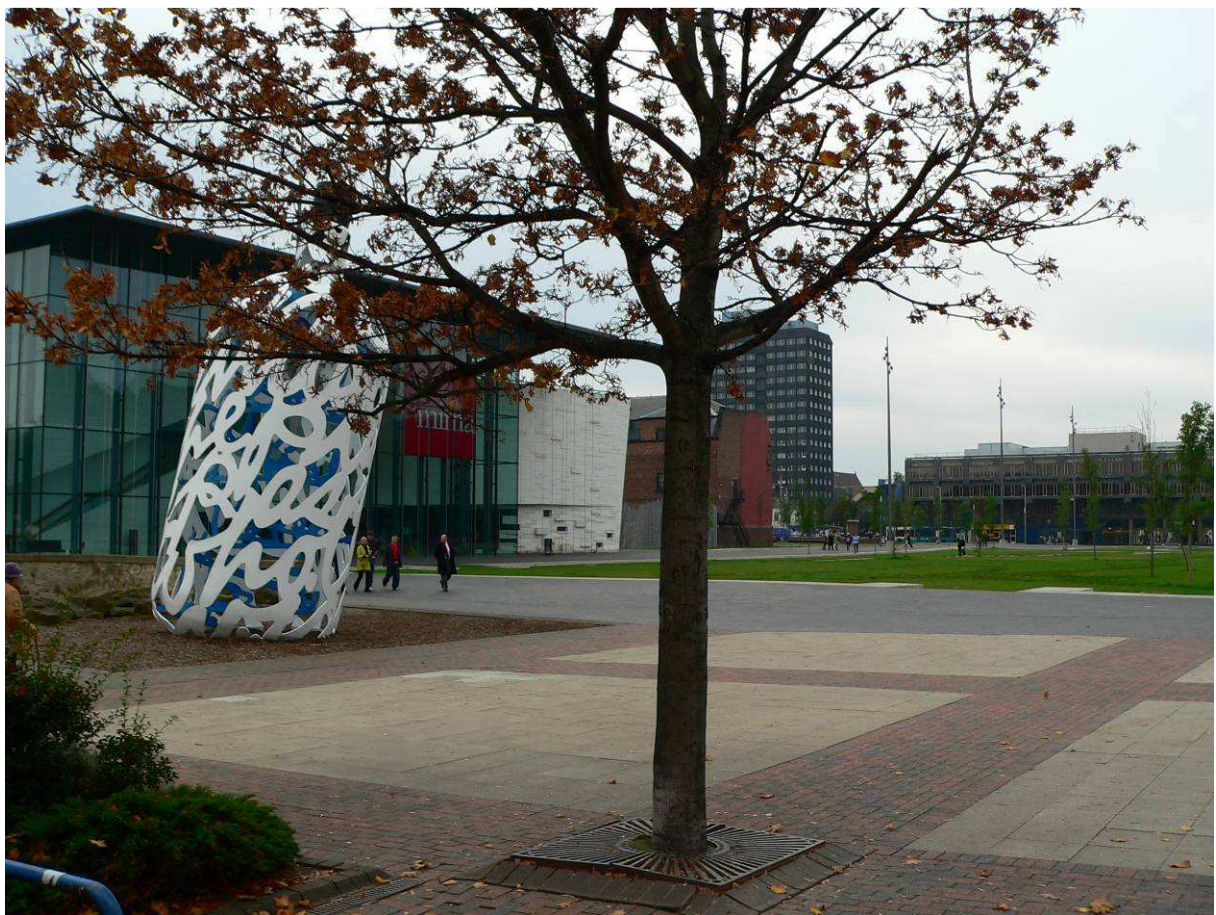
practices have found favour globally across small urban pockets of ‘counter spaces’, from favela activism in parts of Latin America<sup>67</sup> to urban social centres in Italy.<sup>68</sup> Recessions provide a useful interject to reflect on past practice, rethink future policies and sharpen skills. It is within such a climate that innovatory practice can flourish as (public, private and community) actors are challenged to seek alternative ways of working. Consequently, strategic and operational place-shaping partnerships are likely to take on added importance over future years.

Places across the UK that were not able to sustainably rebrand, reimage or reconfigure themselves when the good times were rolling or over-extended themselves with the commissioning of lavish cultural amenities, for example, now have to survive a harsh economic climate and drastic cuts in public expenditure. Yet perversely, it is places that were bypassed by the urban renaissance, such as Burnley, Stockport and Middlesbrough, which may possess some keys to unlock the models and strategies necessary to regenerate for a recovery.

Economically and spatially marginal, ‘left-over’ towns and cities have been tackling high rates of worklessness, large-scale redundancies and urban abandonment for decades. They possess ample experience of the requisite tradeoffs and resource prioritisation necessitated in more stringent times, but some recognise that place quality also counts. For example, as Middlesbrough was well versed in economic recovery tactics even before the global economic shocks, key actors recognised the role of place quality in revitalising a community that had grown accustomed to an urban landscape pockmarked with industrial eyesores, zombie sites, urban voids and physical degradation, and consequently voted the ‘worst town in Britain’. As a response, a collection of actors invested over **£4m on public realm enhancements and the redesign of Victoria Park (now named Central Square), which provides the high quality spatial setting befitting of** the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) (see Figures 7 and 8). The gallery, designed by Erick van Egeraat, opened in 2007 as part of a **£20m economic recovery initiative intended to restore some pride in the town and** attract visitors from within and outside the region. **Resulting in positive media coverage, increased footfall, and a town focal point that is regularly used for outdoor cultural activities** and music events (see Figure 9); **Middlesbrough’s vigour not to make cuts on quality appears to be paying dividends. An illustration was the BBC’s decision to stage the 2007 Proms** at Central Square, which attracted an estimated

20,000 people to the town centre with around 8,000 visitors to MIMA in a single day. Physical improvements and place promotion were also accompanied by a bespoke management strategy, including street wardens. **But even so, injecting £20m in order to create approximately 3,700 square metres of cultural space and 19,000 square metres of public space, including unsurprisingly a 120-jet water feature, is not enough to reverse the fortunes of a left-over town with a population of around 140,000. Administered as an urban attractor, less thought was given to its role within a broader place-shaping strategy: how it can reach out into the surrounding communities and improve connections with the neighbouring spatial landscape.**

**Figure 7. MIMA – Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art**



**Figure 8. Middlesbrough's Central Square**



**Figure 9. An annual music event at Central Square, Middlesbrough**



**Investigating the experiences, practices and interventions of towns and cities, such as Middlesbrough, in a perennial state of regeneration, may provide pointers for others considering the role of place quality in the shaping of places for a recovery.**

Nevertheless, prior experience, including **lessons from other spatially-specific successes and failures, is not** to be confused with ready-made international ‘best-practice’ remedies. Indeed, it could be challenged that a major flaw with many renaissance projects was that they appeared to blindly roll-out pre-packaged ‘solutions’ from *other* places. With this in mind and consistent with the spatially-contingent theorisation of place-shaping applied in this paper, it is deemed counterproductive to identify generic place-shaping ‘keys’. Any such catalogue would be superficial and misappropriated. Instead, the role of place quality is advocated as a **invariable across spatially-contingent place-shaping endeavours.**

## Quality counts: questioning the wisdom of *cuts in quality*

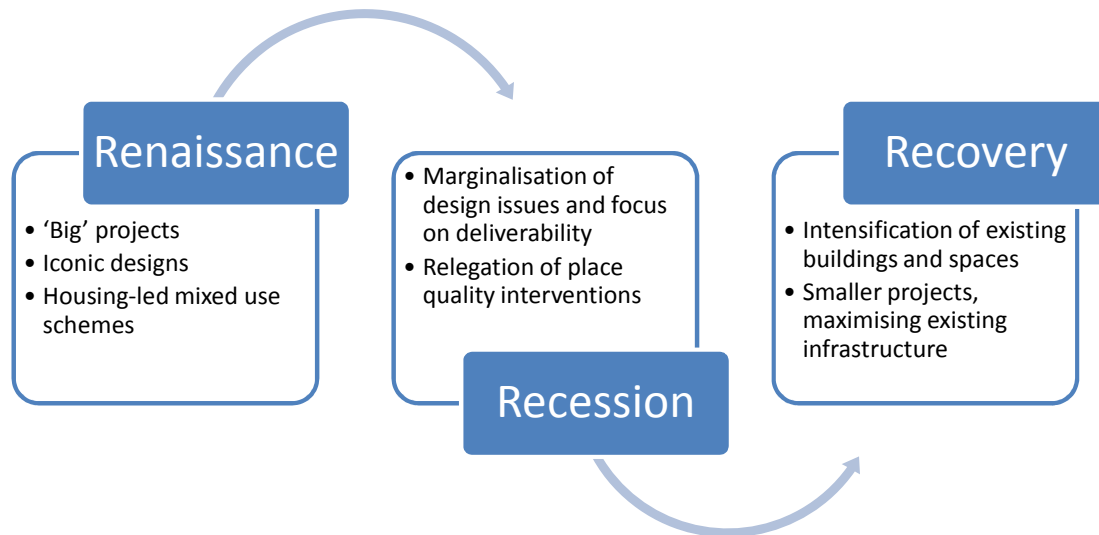
With many renaissance projects mothballed in the wake of the credit crunch and those intended to be brought forward looking to cut costs wherever possible, there is an impending danger that the quality counts mantra – which recognises *value* – is replaced by a short-term view that equates lower costs with higher profits. Such a real and potential outlook may be partly attributable to the inadequacy of place quality proxy measures and crude development targets. The multidimensionality of place quality – its centrality to social life – remains underappreciated and the place-shaping process as a value generator is more complex than is presently understood.

Different lenses can provide complementary assessments, which may necessitate the use of multiple tools to help grasp alternative spatial stories and the views of multiple publics.<sup>69, 70</sup> Even so, with public sector fiscal retrenchment set to savagely restrict infrastructure investment and revenue funding for much of the next decade, and perhaps beyond, in the UK and elsewhere, there is a need for new ways of capturing place quality. Whilst the value of design, the cultural role of space and the management of place require multilayered value frameworks that capture use value and subjective qualities,<sup>71</sup> it is unlikely that sufficient resources will be released by public and private interests unless exchange value is sufficiently demonstrated. Consequently, as we shape places in an age of austerity there is a danger of a return to viewing place quality as an unaffordable luxury, rather than seeing it as a *process* that is integral to place-shaping; regenerating localities and adding value (See Figure 10 for a summary of the broad place quality trends since 1997, which speculates those trends over the recovery wave). Taking the former path where the place quality ‘luxury’ has been slavishly discounted, characterised by short-termism, could potentially result in unsustainable places, reminiscent of some of the business and industrial parks rapidly constructed under the Enterprise Zones (EZs) initiative of the 1979-1997 Conservative Government. The establishment of EZs as ‘sirens of free enterprise’, however, failed to sustain private sector property markets in the majority of peripheral places.<sup>72</sup> Internationally, speculative ‘growth-machine’ strategies in the US, for example, have suffered economic contraction following an initial period of growth, which calls into question the sustainability of such practice.<sup>73</sup> Taking the latter path where place quality is viewed as more than aesthetics to position it as a process that assists in the shaping, functioning and workings of places, characterised by a longer-term approach, may help lay some solid foundations for a more environmentally-



conscious economic recovery. For example, Jan Gehl has documented the incremental pedestrianisation of Copenhagen and the associated increases in usage achieved over several decades.<sup>74</sup>

**Figure 10. From renaissance to recovery: place quality trends**



## Conclusion

Over the next decade, the UK as well as many other nations, will face some tough political choices relating to need versus opportunity and quality versus quantity, as all actors – public, private and community – are charged with ‘doing more with less’. To recall Bob Dylan’s 1964 hit, ‘The Times They Are A-Changin’’, is pertinent to the recent evolution of the shaping of places. The 1997 to 2007 UK urban renaissance wave was largely fuelled by consumption activities, including retail, leisure, financial services and housing-led regeneration. Geographically, the ‘winners’ tended to be prominent city spaces, choice places and other urban gateway sites. Between 2007 and 2009 recession mitigation measures took precedence as attention diverted from place quality interventions and long-term renaissance ambitions to a preoccupation with rapid economic responses and intensified social support measures. Since the Coalition Government gained power in May, 2010, the demise of place quality as a crucial public policy goal appears to have continued. With a sluggish economic recovery for the UK anticipated by many commentators, place quality advances up until 2007, particularly in more marginal, ‘left-over’ towns, may rapidly retreat. Such a trend has precedents internationally, such as those shrinking cities and ghost towns identified earlier.

In the face of raising the ‘quality bar’ over the past decade and the steady progress made in educating different communities of practice that place quality makes commercial sense, the prevailing outlook in austere times risks undoing such progress. Despite the recognised role of local authorities as place-shaping leaders,<sup>1, 75</sup> many core components such as place management or urban design remain discretionary local authority activities. Consequently, there is a propensity to cut these services first as they tend to be more politically palatable than reducing social services, such as care homes or libraries. Unfortunately, many local authorities still consider a town centre manager or design professional as a ‘nice to have’, whereas a development control planning officer tends to be viewed as a ‘must have’ when it comes to budget-saving and restructuring exercises. As place-shaping professionals in the public and private sectors face redundancies alike, together with the complete dismantling of public-private place city development partnerships, regeneration bodies and destination management organisations in the most extreme circumstances, there is a distinct possibility that skills, experience and local spatial knowledge lost now will not be replaced once the ‘good times’ (associated with the macroeconomic cycle) return. The loss of tacit-knowledge refined over many years of practice could have severe repercussions for the shaping of places over the next decade. It is therefore apt to conclude this paper with the clarion call that whilst place quality is not easily counted or quantified, it surely counts, necessitating a commitment to quality. With any change in government and/or economic outlook, there is an opportunity to do things differently. Place-shaping, practiced across globally connected local places, needs to draw on both the successes and failures of the renaissance and recession mitigation policy waves if the recovery wave is to be equitable, just and sustainable; raising the place quality benchmark.

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