

Chapter 2

British Town Planning on the Eve of the Second World War

Abstract This chapter is dealing with the situation of Town Planning in Britain during the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. A summary of the socio-economic context following the Great Depression, of the ideas of the pioneering planners, and of the procedure of the “Planning Acts” as it had developed by 1939 are examined. The absence of planning schemes resulted in an entirely piecemeal development leading to growing concern about the quality of the British townscape. Another issue was the “compensation and betterment” question, perceived to be most difficult where the central values were at their highest.

Our aim here is to identify the situation of British town planning on the eve of the Second World War. The approach is based on the view that town planning is both, an expression of a utopian idealism which attempts to attain the “perfect world” and the “ideal city” (Cherry 1974, p. 6), and the product of an effort to minimize frictional effects in the land and building market, achieving minimum environmental standards. It follows from this definition, and its historical context, that a summary of the ideas of the pioneering planners, and of the procedure of the “Planning Acts”, as it had developed by 1939, will provide a satisfactory foundation for a consideration of the British town planning inheritance on the eve of the Second World War.

Ebenezer Howard’s concept of the self-financing, medium-sized cities of about 30,000 people, sited in open countryside and surrounded by a large “green belt” was published in his book *Tomorrow, The Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in 1898 and re-issued in 1902 as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. The basis of its appeal was the Le Playist belief of the importance of the interaction between environment and society (Buder 1990, pp. 64–77; Meller 1995, p. 303). It is often regarded as the most influential idea and the most decisive contribution in the creation of the British Planning System in the twentieth century (Hall 1985, p. 44). Besides the foundation of the first Garden City at Letchworth in 1903, and the adaptation of the village-like residential scale to the creation of a conventional suburb (Abercrombie 1943, p. 99) by the establishment of the Garden Suburb at Hampstead in north-west London between 1905 and 1909, the major influence of Howard’s ideas lay more in

growing concern about land use, urban layout and house design (Stevenson 1984, p. 231). Architects and planners—such as Raymond Unwin, Barry Parker, Patrick Abercrombie, Frederick Osborn and Patrick Geddes—, expanded and applied the Garden City concept and combined it with foreign ideas to produce a distinctive British planning movement, although it was considered by Patrick Abercrombie (Abercrombie 1943, p. 98) as the implementation of the English ideal of low-density garden and house type of residential planning. Anyway, the Garden City idea prompted enough achievement in Britain to justify the survival and further development of the idea into the 1940s (Sutcliffe 1990, p. 258).

The foundation of the British Urban and Regional Planning System could be considered as an accumulating corpus of legislation contained in a series of “Planning Acts”, beginning with the Housing, Town Planning, etc. Act, 1909 (Sutcliffe 1981, p. 86). This Act was a moderate and realistic measure which made town planning powers available to local government within four years of the coinage of the term “town planning” and within less than a decade of the first importation of the town planning idea from Germany. In practice, and although Parliament and the people expected the Act of 1909 to be used to promote development of the “garden city type”, it basically allowed urban authorities to lay down the pattern of main streets, to set aside land for open space and public buildings, and to fix densities and house types in the residential districts (Sutcliffe 1981, p. 82; Sutcliffe 1988, p. 301).

The Housing and Town Planning Act, 1919 followed. Even though, it was made national and compulsory, it did little in practice to broaden the basis of town planning. Practically, town planning was exercised on only a small scale, though since 1920, it had been supervised by a special Department of the Ministry of Health (Ashworth 1965, p. 212). That type of town planning was not formally separated from housing until the passage of the Town Planning Act, 1925, which was a consolidating measure (Sheail 1985, p. 344). It was succeeded by the Town and Country Planning Act, 1932, in which the aspect that the countryside needed planning as much as towns, and the resulting concept of “town and country planning”, was embodied. This important Act made it possible in principle for all building development in England and Wales, whether in town or country, to be made subject to planning control (Cherry 1988, p. 92). However, effective control was dependent on the existence of statutory plans, and in this respect there were serious deficiencies as late as 1939. For example, there is no question that the failure to relieve the problems created or aggravated by suburban development was largely due to inadequate town planning. This failure can be attributed to two factors: defective legislation and the apathy of the planning authorities (Richardson and Aldcroft 1968, p. 316).

In the meanwhile, the socio-economic framework had changed worldwide and in Britain especially it was the phenomenon of the Great Depression. The Great Depression in Britain, also known as the “Great Slump”, was a period of national economic recession in the 1930s, which had its origins in the global Great Depression. It was Britain’s largest and most profound economic crisis of the twentieth century, it originated in the United States in late 1929 and quickly spread

to the world. Since Britain had never experienced the boom that had characterised the USA, Germany, Canada and Australia in the 1920s, the repercussions were less severe (Richardson 1969, pp. 3–19). Britain's world trade fell by half (1929–1933), the output of heavy industry fell by a third, employment profits plunged in nearly all sectors. At the depth in summer 1932, registered unemployed numbered 3.5 million, and many more had only part-time employment. Particularly, hardest hit by economic problems were the industrial and mining areas in the north of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Unemployment reached 70 % in some areas at the start of the 1930s (with more than 3 million out of work nationally) and many families depended entirely on payments from local government known as the dole.

In the 1930s government interest in planning was further stimulated by the depression and the start of a new war in Europe. There was a new interest in regional economic planning to alleviate the effects of the depression, and in industrial dispersal from the cities to protect industry from possible air attacks in a new war. In city planning terms the Great Depression triggered the interest in the broader picture of geographical patterns of urban growth instead of the individual city. It was also the first time that the great divide between industrial areas hard hit by the economic recession and others that survived the shock was acknowledged. Central Scotland, the North-East and South Wales were hard hit, while London, Leicester and Birmingham survived (Hall et al. 1973, vol I, pp. 85 and 105).

Early in 1937, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain appointed a Royal Commission on the Geographical Distribution of the Industrial Population, under the chairmanship of Sir Anderson Montague Barlow. It reported in January 1940, and it proved to be the most important single influence in the creation of the modern British Planning System (Hall 1989, p. 33). As a matter of fact, the whole British problem in the context of the distribution of industrial population, forced such ideas, as the *decentralisation* of the population on the one hand, and on the other, the *containment* of the urban areas. On this subject are very well known the works of Frederick Osborne (*New Towns after the War*) (1942) and of Peter Hall et al. (*The containment of Urban England*) (1973) respectively. Furthermore, the idea of the “Green Belt” (*Green-belt cities, The British Contribution*, by Osborne 1946) was introduced to help in the attempt of containment of urban areas. The New Towns, built by the Development Corporation under the New Towns Act, 1946, became the main instrument of the decentralisation policy in Britain; in Greater London eight New Towns were established between 1946 and 1949 (Hall et al. 1973, vol II, p. 334). Underlying this evolution was hidden the concept of “national balance”. The concentration of such a large proportion of the national population in Greater London constituted a serious drain on the rest of the country (Hall 1989, p. 34).

At this point, it is necessary to examine the conditions which influenced positively or negatively the actual use of the new planning powers in the 1930s. For this, two subjects must be analysed in a more detailed way: the first subject is housing needs, and the second one is the road traffic question in the large urban agglomerations.

As far as housing is concerned, a corpus of legislation had built up since the middle of the nineteenth century. Well in advance of the passing of the 1909

Planning Act, local authorities had been provided with extensive powers to clear and replace slum housing, and eventually to provide new housing to meet general needs, unconnected with clearance schemes. The outstanding statutes were the Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act, 1875, which permitted the demolition of entire districts of slums and their reconstruction with new housing, and the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890, which facilitated the construction of housing for general needs (Wohl 1977). Indeed, town planning was at first seen in legislative terms as an extension of the housing power, which explains why the 1909 planning powers were presented to Parliament as part of a housing Bill. However, since 1919, and after the passing of the Housing and Town Planning Act, a new impetus had been given to the production of housing schemes, mainly through a system of central government subsidies and a requirement that local authorities formally assess their housing needs. It was estimated that at least 800.000 houses were needed to replace the slums and make up arrears of house-building from the First World War years, while in 1918 there were 610.000 fewer than families (Stevenson 1984, p. 221).

In 1924, the Wheatley Housing Act increased the State subsidy for houses built for rent (Stevenson 1984, p. 222). However, little had been done to tackle the twin "evils" of that period that is of *slum clearance* and *overcrowding*. It is estimated that between 1875 and 1930 probably less than 200.000 people had been removed from slum areas and re-housed. The main attempt to face the above twofold housing problem started after the passing of the Housing Act, 1930, which introduced a new subsidy system specifically for slum clearance. It was related not to the number of houses built, but to the number of persons displaced and re-housed. This boost for slum clearance was supplemented by a policy for the relief of overcrowding, initiated by the Housing Act, 1935 (Richardson and Aldcroft 1968, pp. 179, 180 and 185). On the basis of local authority returns, it was estimated that 3.8 % (341.000) of the dwellings inspected were overcrowded and that the worst areas in England and Wales were in the East End of London and in north-east England (Cherry 1974, p. 106).

As Harry Richardson and Derek Aldcroft argued (1968, p. 187), the achievements of the new policy in the 1930s were hardly spectacular, and by 1939 only the fringe of the problem had been attacked. Altogether barely 375.000 new houses had been built specifically for the purpose of abolishing the slums and overcrowded dwellings. Most of the houses were built in the form of quite extensive suburban council housing estates, which needed—though they did not always receive—careful planning. Whether the building of housing estates reinforced or undermined town planning as such, depended on local circumstances. Normally, the housing estates were planned and built by architects from the Public Works Department, and not by the—usually very small—town planning staff. Sometimes, liaison between the two groups was close, but in other cases the town planning staff found that they were virtually excluded of essential information. The potential dissension was exacerbated after 1930, when local authorities in the large urban areas turned to slum clearance and reconstruction under the encouragement of the Housing Act, 1930. Alison Ravetz believes that (1974, p. 123), this Act facilitated procedures for

clearance and introduced a new Exchequer subsidy which was increased when re-housing was done in flats over three storeys on expensive sites.

Regarding the road planning question and its legislative correlation with town planning, the affinity is comparable to that between housing and town planning. Actually, since the arrival of the railways in the 1830s, road traffic had been so reduced that roads outside the urban areas had scarcely attracted the attention of the legislator. Suddenly, all this began to change with the arrival of the motor vehicle from about 1900. The development of statistical data referring to the production of motor vehicles during the inter-war years indicates the rapid rate of change. Britain had produced just 34,000 motor vehicles of all kinds in 1913; however, by 1924 the figure had risen to 146,000, and by 1937 it had reached 507,000. At the same time, in 1914 there were only 140,000 motor vehicles of all kinds in Britain, by 1931 the figure was 1,500,000, and by 1939, 3,000,000, 2,000,000 of which were private vehicles (Stevenson 1984, pp. 110 and 130).

In administrative terms, in the early 1900s the county authorities were still weak and inexperienced; road problems were tackled in the countryside by a powerful central government department, the Board of Trade. In this context, the government set up the Royal Commission on London Traffic which deliberated from 1903 to 1905. The Commission emphasised the need for road widening, for uniformity of building laws and bye-laws to control new development, and for local authorities to define frontages and ensure that new development did not hamper the provision of new roads. Next, the London Traffic Branch of the Board of Trade was set up in 1906, to advise the government on all matters concerning “locomotion, transport and traffic” (Thomson 1969, pp. 94–95). The problem in London was that many of the outer suburbs, and the outlying free-standing towns, lay outside the boundaries of the London County Council (LCC), making effective road planning by the LCC impossible.

Thus, very early in the twentieth century, the Board of Trade came to take the initiative in road planning for the whole London area, including the County of London. A number of major improvement schemes were suggested for the central area as well; an east-west avenue on the line Bayswater Road—City—Whitechapel and a similar North-South route from Holloway to the Elephant and Castle were the most important ones. However, Board of Trade intervention was not normally direct, for the county authorities were statutorily responsible for main roads within their areas until 1937, when the Trunk Roads Act transferred 4,500 miles of main roads from the local authorities to the Ministry of Transport, which had been established as a new Ministry in 1919, assuming the Board of Trade’s road responsibilities. J Michael Thomson argued that (1969, pp. 95, 96 and 98), at that time one could find the following pattern of progress which occurred regularly in road planning in London: (i) growing complaints about traffic congestion; (ii) production of an ambitious plan; (iii) modification of the plan to meet objections on grounds of cost and amenity, and (iv) implementation of the modified plan.

The above road traffic situation had variable implications for town planning. Normally, the county authorities could be relied on to ensure that a major radial artery running out of a county borough was continued beyond the city boundary by

a compatible road, and the coordination of urban and county road plans was often assured by the regional planning machinery which could be set up under the Housing, Town Planning Act, 1919 and later enactments. Peter Hall supported that (1985, p. 84), the need for regional/local planning was already coming to be recognised when Geddes was writing in 1915, but the need for national/regional planning only became fully evident in the aftermath of the Great Depression of 1929–1932. In areas where the joint town planning committee was not in existence, or where it was ineffective, the Ministry of Transport was willing to intervene directly to bring the county and county borough authorities together, to secure the coordination of their road plans. However, the national framework of road planning helped to keep road planning in the urban areas in the hands of the City Engineer, with the detailed work being done by staff in the Public Works Department, rather than by the town planners. With council housing and roads thus in the hands of others, the town planners found the scope of their work severely circumscribed. Admittedly, it promoted effectively the idea that town and country would be better if they were planned as an entity, or as a system.

However, in addition to both of the above factors, one of the greatest environmental disasters of the inter-war years occurred in the form of an urban phenomenon, which was in a way a combination of the traffic and housing developments of that period. This was the so-called *ribbon development*, which is the building of houses along the entire length of the frontages of new main roads, usually by-passes, designed to remove through-traffic from congested urban areas and pretty country towns. These by-passes were normally built by the county road authorities through rural areas to which no town planning powers applied. Thus, there was nothing to stop developers buying up the frontage sites and erecting houses which, because they faced onto an established road, did not incur road charges. The resulting long ribbons of housing, entirely closing in new roads which might otherwise have been landscaped as parkways on the American model, were regarded as undesirable from the social, aesthetic and traffic points of view. Eventually, in 1935, Parliament passed the Restriction of Ribbon Development Act (Ashworth 1965, p. 223). This statute required all new development within 68 m of the middle of a “classified” road to have the approval of the highway authority, together with the creation of any new access to the classified road. These powers prevented the worst ribbon development, but still did not amount to effective, *comprehensive*¹ planning in the vicinity of major roads, as there were uncertainties between the Ministries of Transport and Health, delay over necessary action and ineffectiveness once it had been taken (Cherry 1988, p. 97).

Beside the above developments, a very uneven distribution of town planning schemes across the country had been established, as a product of the approach to planning adopted in the 1909 Act, and enshrined without essential modification in

¹ In particular, this term was used to describe a scheme covering a large area of land whereon a multiplicity of land uses were integrated into a unified scheme of development, comprising roads, traffic planning and car parking, land use, buildings, aesthetics and landscaping.

later enactments. In practice, planning schemes were more likely to be in existence for suburban residential districts developed since 1909, than they were for districts built before 1909, and for industrial districts. The explanation for this uneven and disappointing progress is to be found principally in the failure of the legislature to deal effectively with the perennial problem of *compensation*. It has to be recognised that compensation, together with the related issue of *betterment*, was a complex question, both technically and politically. It was related to a long-running strand of land-reform rhetoric which stretched back through John Stuart Mill to Thomas Spence, and which had received a new injection from across the Atlantic in the later nineteenth century in the form of Henry George's "single tax" proposal. It was this reformist atmosphere which helped to ease the path of the 1909 Planning Act, but it also had the paradoxical effect of weakening the planning clauses. This weakening occurred because when John Burns, the President of the Local Government Board, and his officials at the Board sought advice, principally from the Treasury, on the "compensation and betterment" aspects of town planning schemes, they were told that the broader context of the problem would be tackled in a separate land taxation measure to be brought forward by the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sutcliffe 1981, pp. 65, 72–75 and 123; Sutcliffe 1988, p. 299). Indeed, a series of land taxes were included in the 1909 Finance Bill, which precipitated the notorious show-down with the House of Lords in 1910.

Meanwhile, the Burns Planning Bill made concessions during its passage through the House of Lords, and the upshot was that local authorities were empowered (by Sect. 58[3]) to recover half the value of any betterment resulting from a planning scheme, and were required to compensate full for any "worsenment" (Ashworth 1965, p. 186). Not only was the arrangement fundamentally unfavourable to the authorities, but the valuation problem was virtually ignored. In practice, the betterment levy proved impossible to enforce, and the threat of compensation undermined the position of the authorities in dealing with the private property owners. In general terms, the "compensation and betterment" provisions were still essentially defective in 1932, and the whole attempt could be characterised as a failure to resolve the fundamental issues of the whole problem.

The "compensation and betterment" question was perceived to be most difficult where the central values were at their highest. In the average British city in 1939, the suburbs were normally partially planned under planning schemes approved since 1909. The inner residential districts of early nineteenth century slums were being cleared and rebuilt under the bye-laws of the 1870–1914 period. Planning schemes were not normally in force in these areas, but the housing was so new that no redevelopment could as yet be envisaged. The industrial areas were gradually consolidating themselves as factory expansions demolishing adjacent housing. This left out the city centres, which were not normally subject to planning schemes, but which in the 1920s, and particularly in the 1930s, were being redeveloped by private enterprise accommodation (Whitehand 1984, pp. 174–200). The result was entirely piecemeal and concern grew about the quality of the British townscape.

At this point, the following questions are arisen: what were the war damages caused in Britain by the enemy's action during the Second World War? What were the special measures introduced concerning the technical formation of the built environment, and in particular that of the central areas?

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