



URBAN POLLINATORS

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COMMENT AND ANALYSIS FROM JULIAN DOBSON

CITIES FOR THE FUTURE

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR BRITAIN'S URBAN CENTRES

WELCOME

Urban Pollinators is a consultancy and practical think tank founded by Julian Dobson. This newsletter is part of a series of occasional commentaries on topical subjects. We hope you find it useful and informative; please pass it on to anyone you think will be interested.

This month we focus on challenges facing our cities, outlining some themes explored in Julian's *State of the City* talk for Belfast City Council in autumn 2012.

CITIES FOR THE FUTURE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUR URBAN CENTRES

There's a German saying that's famous among urbanists and planners: *Stadtluft macht frei*. 'City air makes free' is the translation. It conveys a sense that the city is a place of possibility and potential.

But there is another view of city air, rooted in Victorian industry, that still permeates public consciousness: filth, night soil, boiling bones, chemicals. In London the first thing you used to come across when you crossed the river Lea on the District Line heading east was the steaming complex of Berk Spencer Acids. It was there because this was the old London County Council boundary, and noisome smells and filthy tasks belonged downwind and beyond the planners' purview. They also belonged, inevitably, to the areas that were poorer. Look at today's cities and you'll see that the same patterns persist: Sheffield, for example, divides between the poor (and previously industrial) east and the wealthy (and once white-collared) west.

This view of city air gave rise to the garden city movement, the cottage estates and City Beautiful – of cities as places of order where production and consumption are kept well apart. The UK government wants a [new generation of garden cities](#), but has little clue about what will sustain or breathe life into them. It understands consumption but not production. Examine its welfare policies and you might conclude that the city air that makes free comes at a high price, which many can never afford.

An uncertain future

Our cities face an uncertain and potentially troubled future. At the start of 2013 the leaders of three of England's biggest northern cities, Liverpool, Newcastle and Sheffield, [warned of social unrest](#) if cuts in local government funding continued. In Belfast, 2012 closed with violence on the streets as the loyalist community fought to keep the Union Flag flying every day at City Hall; the symbol of unity and pride that had been celebrated at the London Olympics was once again a sign of division and shame. As the last smoke of the New Year fireworks clears, most of our cities face another year of belt-tightening.

I believe our cities can help to shape a better future, and one where production and consumption work together for the benefit of all, not just the well-heeled. But they will not do so simply by relying on tired and rusted theories of property development, inward investment and 'growth' regardless of the consequences on our own or future generations.

To begin to think constructively about the future of our cities and of a society which is increasingly urbanised we need to be ready to ask the 'what if?' questions. The 'known knowns' and the 'known unknowns' are just the beginning. The 'unknown unknowns' can have the greatest impact – and we should add to those the unwanted knowns, the things we should have considered but didn't, such as poverty and inequality, access to resources and opportunities, and the effects of concentrated power and wealth.

When it comes to city development, we need to keep questioning whether civic leaders' bold plans for physical and economic transformation are founded on sound social and environmental premises. How responsive are they likely to be to change – or do they simply assume linear projections of prosperity?

In search of nirvana

Projections of prosperity are of course attractive. There are urban gurus who are making excellent money by predicting it. A decade ago it was [Richard Florida](#) with his creative class theory – everyone suddenly wanted to turn their cities into funky, bohemian places and if they didn't have any funky bohemians they'd get a marketing agency to brand them in. More recently there was Ed Glaeser with his [Triumph of the City](#), a panegyric to urban entrepreneurship and market-driven prosperity. An Australian pundit, John Montgomery, has recently written a book called [Upwave](#), which argues that 'a new golden age of capitalism began around 2002, which will see previously unseen levels of wealth creation over the next 20 years'. Perhaps we can deduce that humans have an enviable knack of discovering rich seams of unsubstantiated optimism and mining them until they're exhausted.

There's a one-size-fits-all formula for city centre regeneration that's been tried in dozens of cities over the last 15 years or so, both in the UK and internationally. It goes a bit like this.

First, wring your hands over your city's lack of competitiveness – the poor retail offer, empty warehouses and old offices. Second, bring in a world-famous architect or expensive consultancy to knock you up a masterplan with blobby buildings and top-of-the-range computer graphics. Third, create some nice public spaces with cafes, fountains and expensive restaurants. Fourth, add a shopping centre with the same big-name anchor tenants you'll find in whatever city is perceived as your closest competitor. Fifth, spend years assembling sites, doing deals and paying lawyers. Finally, sit back and watch the market weave its magic.

The problem is that sometimes the market doesn't work its magic, leaving the public sector holding a very expensive baby. And sometimes it does, but only by sucking activity from neighbouring towns and cities.

Bradford is a case in point. You have to admire its planners and politicians over many years for insisting something should be done to restore the city's fortunes. You might be less admiring of the mixed results. It is, after all, only 30 years or so since the last grand makeover, with the creation of a ring road system (not completed) and new indoor shopping centres. And if you live in Bradford and are proud of the city, the last thing you want to do is play second

fiddle to nearby Leeds. So the council brought in Will Alsop to do a masterplan. The premise was that an enhanced public realm would attract investment: offices, retail, leisure. You speculate to accumulate.

But speculation doesn't always work. Halfway through the grand plan, the property market collapsed and Westfield, which was to run the flagship Broadway shopping development, focused its energies on more lucrative sites in London. Westfield became Wastefield. The story since has been something of a curate's egg: [City Park](#), the lake and public space outside City Hall, is open and is a superb amenity for Bradfordians; Broadway became a temporary urban garden while Westfield dithers over the scale and timing of its promised investment; and New Victoria Place, the office complex that was to take the place of the much-loved Bradford Odeon, has been [dumped](#). Meanwhile the main private investor in the city centre is Provident Financial, the doorstep loans company which was based in Bradford already and has simply moved down the hill.

Civilisations don't collapse, do they?

There is an important role for masterplanning and thinking about the big picture, but as a form of civic gambling it's fraught with pitfalls. Bradford's grand plans were always hard to sell to a sceptical public, who rightly felt they'd had little say in them. The best plans need to grow out of people's own investments of time, energy and civic commitment, and be flexible enough to be shaped by the people in unpredictable circumstances. And they need to meet four major challenges: a broken model of property investment that is increasingly unlikely to deliver the returns investors have become used to; the disappearance of secure, long term employment with low barriers to entry; persistent poverty that has left entire neighbourhoods with limited prospects and little reason to buy en masse into social norms; and the increasing pressures on our shared (and desperately undervalued) natural environment.

When we talk about starting with the people, I would suggest our first duty is to future generations: to remind ourselves of the [Brundtland dictum](#) that sustainable development is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

It's both arrogant and myopic to assume that ours is the first civilisation in history that won't come to an end. We need to examine the factors that lead to collapse – the unsustainable use of resources, social division and the loss of effective governance, the inability to produce the goods and services both we and others need – and ensure that as far as we can, we minimise these factors and maximise those that leave the next generation in a better position than our own.

A graduate leaving a UK university in three years' time may have £50,000 of debt. They may start work in a bar or restaurant – the kind of job a school leaver would previously do – or work as an unpaid intern for another year, accumulating more debt. The taxes they eventually pay will have to support an ageing population that will require higher levels of health and social care. Unless there is a radical increase in the supply of affordable housing in the next few years, they will probably pay a growing proportion of their income on insecure private rented accommodation. Their disposable income – the income that drives demand for sectors like leisure and retail – may be less in real terms than a plumber or a miner of the same age 30 years ago.

That doesn't mean collapse is imminent. But collapse is not always sudden: it is the result of processes that can take decades or centuries. When you're in the middle of it, life looks pretty normal. The question is where we are on the

bell curve: are we producing more than we consume, adding to the resources available to future generations or depleting them?

Five risks we have to face

It's worth highlighting five of the biggest risks to the future of our cities. [Resource depletion](#) is happening now at an alarming scale worldwide. Food and water are essentials we can't manage without. The wet weather in the UK that led to terrible harvests in 2012 (costing £1.3bn in lost income, according to the UK National Farmers' Union) or the drought that had similarly devastating effects in the US are not the only events we need to worry about: it's the continuing over-use of resources at a time when world demand is accelerating that should concern us.

Climate change is a risk not only because of long term predictions of rising sea levels, crises such as Super-storm Sandy or changed weather patterns, but because it is likely to amplify the dangers arising from resource depletion and increasing consumption, and because we have no real idea of how to undo the damage. There are short term risks too: the tabs for flooding, rising insurance premiums and greater pressure on emergency services all have to be picked up somewhere.

An ageing population brings obvious pressures in changing the ratio between the number of people who are dependent on others and those who can offer care and support, through their time or through taxes. In most of Western Europe and the US, we have not got to grips with the consequences of demographic change.

Meanwhile wealth is beginning to move from the Western world: the centuries in which Europeans were able to grow fat on the resources of other nations are coming to an end. The divide is no longer just between 'first' and 'third' worlds, but between a global elite of wealthy individuals and corporations and the rest of us. As popular reactions to the disclosures of tax avoidance by Google, Starbucks and Amazon has shown, there is a growing willingness to question the belief that a globalised economy can only be good for us. Such questioning is stimulating not only protest and debate, but also new forms of sharing and ['collaborative consumption'](#).

Fifthly, political unrest is a real possibility, even if Sheffield, Newcastle and Liverpool's leaders are proved premature. When the Greek prime minister [compares the situation in his country](#) to the last years of the Weimar Republic, we should sit up and take notice; when food riots fuel political unrest we should ask ourselves where the next flash-point is likely to be.

These risks are real and some are unavoidable. But our cities can help to generate hope for the future and new ways of fashioning civic life. Understanding the risks can be the basis for new thinking that puts people – including the people of the future – at the centre of our policymaking and planning.

Cities for the future

Four key qualities are required for our cities to lead the way to a sustainable future. They need to be adaptable, able to respond readily to unpredictable or unpredicted changes and emergencies. They need to be creative, places of imagination that encourage and welcome new ideas and thinking. They need to be productive, growing and making as much as they can to meet their own needs and valuing the time and talents of all their inhabitants – not just those in high growth industries or 'high net worth' individuals. And they need to be places that steward their re-

sources well, ensuring they protect not just their wealth and physical infrastructure but also the green infrastructure on which so many of the world's unseen but essential resources and services depend.

Adhering to the principles of sustainability outlined back in 2005 in the document [Securing the Future](#) would be a good start. Politicians very quickly forget even the good things they do, and institutional memory is soon lost amid political jockeying. We need to remember this stuff as well as publishing it. Recognising and living within environmental limits should be obvious, but we've stopped talking about it in the context of our obsession with achieving growth. A just and healthy society, similarly, has been put on the back burner as politicians compete to suggest which rights and benefits they will remove next in the name of competitiveness. Taking these principles seriously could profoundly change the way we think about and plan for the future.

The good news is that many places are taking sustainable living seriously. Places like Freiburg in Germany and Portland in Oregon are setting the pace; developments like [Lakeside in Chicago](#) show that greener living doesn't have to be an optional extra.

This isn't just a matter of masterplanning, either. Sustainability works from the ground up as creative people are given space to take action on the issues they care about. It could be contributing to a [community share issue](#) to create locally owned renewable energy, or using neglected public space to grow edible produce. Invite people in, make them welcome and change can begin to happen.

Cities, and the physical centres of cities where people and institutions congregate, can lead this process of rethinking how we do business and create places. Here are five ways cities can drive new thinking:

- by reviving civic engagement, opening up decision-making through transparency and participatory budgeting;
- by using local wealth, especially wealth that exists within the public sector such as commissioning budgets and pension funds, to invest in and sustain local innovation and resources. Manchester's pension fund, for example, is creating a new model of funding for affordable housing;
- by inspiring innovation, not only creating a climate where businesses are welcomed and institutions are encouraged to share research, but by opening public spaces for ideas from all sections of society and creating opportunities for people to link up on innovative projects, as pioneered through events like FutureGov's [Simpl Challenges](#);
- by prioritising production, celebrating those who are developing new and locally sourced products and services, and ensuring planning is used positively to encourage activities that respect and enhance the local community and environment;
- by investing in approaches that green the local economy, from cycling to public transport, from renewable energy to sustainable building methods.

City centres for the people

To enable this to happen we need to think of city centres as social spaces, not just spaces for consumption. This message was at the heart of the thinking behind the [21st Century Agora](#) document and a year after the [Portas Review](#), it needs to be revisited.

The immediate challenges of empty shops and blighted town and city centres and the long term need to create people-centred cities are intimately connected. A culture that views people purely as consumers and planning as a regulatory activity rather than a creative one has been at the heart of the problem. 'Retail-led regeneration' has never truly worked.

We need to focus on activity in our city centres, not just on management – to invest in agitators, not just janitors. And we need to support those who are already there and help them to do better, rather than imagine that our problems will be solved with a new Westfield or by persuading John Lewis to open shop. A resilient local economy, owned and run by people with a long term interest in the locality, is likely to respond far better to change than one where decisions are made in distant boardrooms or government departments.

If our cities and town centres are to become hubs of ideas and innovation, we need to make them places people will want to visit and use. And so access is key – not just community ownership of assets, but access to them. Facilities like libraries and community halls, places of worship and culture, should be opened up as far as possible so they become places of intellectual, cultural and economic exchange.

Finally, time is more important than money. Strategies for improving our cities have relied for too long on the assumption that we need to get people to spend more. At a time when the income of many is falling, that's unrealistic. Encouraging people to spend their time and volunteer their energies will be far better for our city centres than simply asking them to part with their money.

The good news is that we already have the most important resource of all: the people who live in our cities and communities. But they need to know that the cities belong to all of them, and can be places where all are welcomed and appreciated. That, not growth or grand planning, is the biggest challenge for 2013, and one that can breathe new life into the old German maxim about city air.

- This article is adapted from my talk for Belfast's *State of the City* debate in October 2012.

IN OTHER NEWS...

- We've had a busy year in 2012, with a particular focus on the future of town centres - giving evidence to two London Assembly inquiries and speaking at numerous events - and on urban green spaces. You can read more in the [review of the year](#) on our website.
- We're looking forward to the publication shortly of our latest policy research with the think tank [Res Publica](#), on the theme of people-centred regeneration. It will look especially at the role social landlords can play in building and strengthening community networks and acting as catalysts for local economic development.
- In December we joined forces with Action for Market Towns to bring together a clutch of expert commentators to mark the anniversary of the Portas Review. You can read a summary of what they had to say [here](#), and find out why we're arguing that '[me towns' should become 'we towns'](#).

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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And if you'd like us to work with you, help you with writing, research, facilitation or training, or speak at an event you're organising, please [contact us](#) or speak to Julian Dobson on 07545 874556.