A critique of Masterplanning as a technique for introducing urban design quality into British Cities

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Abstract
The aims of this paper are to investigate the myths and realities of Masterplanning, set in the context of urban design methodologies. In analysing it as a technique, alternatives such as Frames of Reference will be considered. Masterplanning came to the fore in post Second World War Planning and again in the Comprehensive Redevelopment era generally associated with the 1960s. It has reappeared in recent years and is starting to achieve acceptance once more. References to the technique have appeared in the DETR Urban Task Force Report (1999) and the Urban White Paper (2000) amongst others. These documents have encouraged an increasing number of cities to adopt it. The proposers have stated that full recognition has been taken of the previous deficiencies and the current generation of plans has overcome them. Thus, it is beginning to become accepted by policy makers and practitioners as a legitimate technique, although the theoretical underpinning appears dated and ripe for academic evaluation. Moreover, while there are a number of theoretical models in urban design, a causal or even contingent association between Masterplanning and a high quality urban environment seems to be based on scant anecdotal evidence. Meanwhile, a number of concerns are starting to be raised. Included is the notion that such plans are starting to become an end in themselves and bear little relation to real urban settings; that the built environment aspects are only considered two-dimensionally; that the plans are deterministic, inflexible and based on the concept of a completed product whereas the evolution of the city is a process. Further analysis reveals that Masterplanning tends to be a broad-brush technique overlaid upon cities with fine-grained structures and a multiplicity of existing interconnected activities. These are often lost during the cleansing process to be replaced by coarse-grained structures that appear to adopt a static disposition often associated with property-led urban regeneration. The paper will provide evidence from a number of these plans and demonstrate how alternative methods can offer dynamic environments that add to the network of existing activities.

Keywords: planning, urban design, heritage, adaptability, sustainability

Origins
The concept of Masterplanning finds its origins in the Renaissance. At almost a simplistic level, urban design theory divides into natural and utopian models. Essentially, the first of these categories promotes incremental growth and gradual change. Whereas, the second relies on the grand plan and it is here that the embryonic beginnings of masterplanning are evident. The Renaissance brought with it the power and courage to handle urban design on a large scale and created what is often called the Grand Manner. However, by the 19th Century, cities were being subjected to greater pressures as populations grew and urbanism became the predominant system (Hall, 1996). This led to a number of proposed utopias – the Metropolitan City of Haussman and Nash, the Garden City suggested by Howard and Wright; Tony Garnier’s Industrial City and the International Modernism of the Machine Age proposed by Le Corbusier in the early part of the 20th Century. The theoretical underpinning for all these concepts focussed on grand plans and the city as a product with functionality, zoning, movement and traffic – amongst the major considerations. An essential aspect to the realisation of a grand plan has been articulated by Leon Krier when he wrote that you can only have a masterplan if you have legitimate authority and power to carry it out (Krier, 1993a, p26). While Haussman possessed the authority and power to reshape Paris, the other pioneers were often unable to realise their schemes. In Britain, John Nash was able to complete the Regent schemes (Risebero, 1982) and on a smaller scale, the fact that Richard Grainger owned the thirteen acres at the centre of Newcastle upon Tyne, enabled him to push through his proposals. In the early 20th Century, a number of modernists followed Le Corbusier’s lead and produced ever more fantastic utopias but they could not gain the power and control of their 19th Century counterparts as a combination of municipal authority and economic depression thwarted their efforts.
Post World War II Planning
The War changed many attitudes and there began to be a huge expectation that a modern people’s Britain would rise out of the ashes. The Country elected the nearest it has ever had to a Socialist Government which exerted massive state control. In Planning, a raft of legislation was introduced that greatly strengthened planning in urban policy. Post war planning assumed a coalition between national positive action via government ministries and nationalised industries; co-ordination of local, regional and national planning via the regional offices of the Government’s Ministry of Town and Country Planning; and local authority planning controls (Hall, 1992). Masterplans became one of the main tools of the resulting pubic sector planning. The masterplans of 1950s were usually highly prescriptive with detailed land uses. In fact, they appeared as design blueprints with very specific proposals. The outlook was much wider than the architecture of individual buildings or even a district, as the plans included huge areas of cities or complete New Towns. Part of the designation of use included high priority on ease of road transport, which often resulted in breaking a city into separate blocks or cells – surrounded by road networks (Healey, 1998; Taylor, 1998; Wong 1998).

Figure 2: Masterplan for Stevenage New Town (omitted)

Figure 3: An Impression of a scheme for complete redevelopment from the Buchanan Report 1963 (omitted)
Comprehensive Redevelopment
Cities across Britain carried out widespread rebuilding of the large parts of their city 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 rebuild from war damage but also included a removal of many existing buildings and spaces from the city centre. The plans included large areas of clearance, larger buildings with a coarser grain of streets and buildings; and emphasis on major new road networks with segregation of pedestrians from vehicles developed in the ideas of the Buchanan Report (1963). For example the plan for Newcastle (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. However, the plans were not just about grand projects. Following on from the immediate post-war era, there were still social and economic concerns about poverty, over-crowding, pollution, employment and health (Healey, 1998). There was a widespread view that if the physical environment was changed then social issues would also improve. This was combined with the notion that the state had a role in a capitalist economy, to direct and influence decisions based on a form of social democracy that was even accepted by the Conservative Party in Britain, and co-thinkers in most of western Europe. This was part of the wider movement of the Beveridge Report, establishing the NHS, comprehensive education and the welfare state, the nationalisation of run-down industries and the adoption of Keynesian economics. (Taylor, 1998). Although there was an expression of social concern - it was top-down with planners, politicians and developers deciding what was to be demolished, changed and built with virtually no involvement of the people effected. The experts believed that they knew best (Taylor, 1998) and the planners, architects and politicians displayed a kind of arrogance towards ordinary people. Not surprisingly, criticism started to grow. Yet, 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, p 119).

While modern planning, with its use of masterplans and modern architecture, had removed slums that suffered from damp, pollution and poor light and lacked inside toilets and hot water, it became associated with an unattractive built environment. There was a growth of bleak housing estates, unfriendly office developments, city centres and neighbourhoods that were losing variety, vitality and good quality public space as major roads cut through the fabric, shops turned away from the streets and other buildings excluded and dominated people.

Masterplans were widely popular in planning and urban policy in the 1960s but the notion of public accountability was a mirage. While the plans were conceived predominantly by local government officers, it was mainly private sector developers and contractors who put the plans into action. The stories about corruption are now legends but the process had other negative effects on British cities. Public sector employees had been so keen to sign-up their private sector partners to see the masterplans enacted that they often agreed to poor terms. One of the conditions was long term options, in some cases up to twenty five years. Even Haussmann had admitted that his plan was out of date before it was complete, but in the 1960s life had really started to gain pace. Masterplans are deterministic concepts that require completion to be effective in any way, but by the 1970s they were subjected to the whims of the property market. Its collapse 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. The status of the environmental professions plummeted as their arrogance had left some scarred and disjointed city centres. Moreover, by 1970, there were thirty four post war New Towns established or designated in Britain. However, by this time the concept had been discredited. Crime, racism and mental illness were as endemic in them as in the traditional centres (Powell, 2000, p11). New projects became considerably smaller in scale and conservation started to be adopted as a viable alternative to new build. Masterplans seemed like an irrelevance and dropped from use.

Evaluation of Post War Masterplanning
Even in the late 1960s masterplanning was being strongly criticised. In terms of the results many pointed to the inhuman buildings, impersonal streets and damage to the fabric of urban life. The growth of the car and the plans for a mass of urban motorways cutting through the fabric of cities and communities, all of which was damaging social connections and the vitality of cities (Appleyard, 1981). Zoning and redevelopment were destroying variety and mixed use, which are vital to cities (Jacobs, 1961). Cities were loosing their different features, recognisable landmarks and areas which create a sense of place and aid identification.
Rebirth of Masterplanning

In the early 1980s, masterplans were hardly ever mentioned in Britain. One defender and user of the term at this time was Leon Krier, although his work was not in Britain. He used it for development proposals in Poing Nord, 1983; Quartier de la Villette, 1976; and Tegel area of Berlin 1980-82 (Krier, 1984). Yet by the late 1980s the term was beginning to be used more widely as a rash of masterplans started to sweep through the country. There were Stockley Park, Uxbridge, by Arup in 1986; King’s Cross, by Farrell in 1987; King’s Cross, by Foster in 1987; Paternoster Square, by Rogers in 1987; Paternoster Square, by Arup in 1987; Poundbury, Dorchester by Krier in 1988; Paternoster Square, by Farrell in 1989 – to name but a few. Large scale urban regeneration projects were back on the agenda. The Thatcher Government had effectively privatised planning with the arguable exception of development control, as part of its commitment to cutting red tape and rolling back the State. There was also a weakening of local government with cuts in resources and abolition of metropolitan authorities. Other changes that weakened the role of councils in planning urban areas were the encouragement of out-of-town development and the establishment of the Urban Development Corporations which were outside of local government control. The Tories used the perceived failure of planning, unpopular tower blocks, unattractive town centres and shabby shopping centres, to support the changes. The role of elected bodies was reduced as quangos such as the Development Corporations took total charge of substantial areas in British cities. They had a similar power of compulsory purchase to that of the local authorities, but they also had large budgets with which to carry it out. (Davies, 1998; Hall, 1992; Wong, 1998). One of the principles of this version of urban regeneration was to reverse the picture of decline. As traditional industries failed, cities were left with apparently empty wastelands around their cores. In particular, the dockland areas that had hummed with activity were left to rot (Powell, 2000, p25). It was mainly these areas that were designated for regeneration by the Urban Development Corporations. However, it was not as simple as that. The areas also often included activities in terms of homes and businesses; and the greater the assembly of land, the more these were drawn into the process. For example, the masterplanned comprehensive approach by Tyne and Wear Development Corporation at Newcastle’s East Quayside had similarities to that employed by the city council, a quarter of a century earlier. Both had the legitimate authority to compulsory purchase a substantial area of the city that included homes and businesses in order to enact a masterplan for large scale urban renewal. In fact, one of the city’s most profitable companies became snared by it. Yet, there were also differences. This new generation of masterplans were not the two dimensional diagrams that had been so familiar in the 1960s. They had metamorphosised into three dimensional detailed illustrations. It has not been articulated as to how and why this change has occurred. Indeed the theory of masterplans does not seem to have developed at all, and certainly its practitioners make no reference to it. The proposition for the appearance of this new incarnation is two fold. First, the masterplans are for areas perceived as run down and dilapidated. The purpose is therefore to provide a vision of what the place could be like. Secondly, it is to generate funds – perhaps in grants – but more probably by means of sales or leases on each of the proposed buildings. The professional switch is also interesting. Partly as a result of the privatisation of planning and partly due to the nature of the illustrations, architects were starting to take the leading role and some advertised themselves as architects and masterplanners. In the deregulated context, architects were trying to act as planners and both were laying claim to urban design. There was also a
strange contradiction in which they were moving away from real plans and towards a kind of artists’ impression. At the beginning of the 21st Century masterplanning is widespread. Of the 130 firms on the Urban Design Group’s website list of practices (undated), over half claim an expertise in masterplanning. At present, almost all major developments are based on a masterplan.

Figure 4: Three dimensional pictorial masterplan – East Quayside, Newcastle upon Tyne
Terry Farrell and Partners for Tyne and Wear Development Corporation (omitted)

Features of a Sustainable City
There are many definitions of a sustainable city and none of them are without criticism. While taking into account the general objective of conserving resources, it is suggested that some of the features by which a sustainable city would be recognised are as follows. The community is at the heart of any sustainable city. It needs to be involved in the development of the city and at least take metaphorical, if not real ownership of it. It is unrealistic to distance the global economy but there should be a supportive local economy to reduce the potential damage of becoming a branch plant economy. Residents are the lifeblood of a city and are essential to its vitality. They generate a multiplicity of activities which can be mutually supportive through their heterogeneous patterns. The nature of the activities and the buildings that house them should be fine grained. This avoids ghettos of similar activity that can appear static and lifeless at certain times of the day or year. It brings different activities in closer contact with one another, enhancing the richness of the interaction. It is also important that activities are vertically as well as horizontally distributed. For example, apart from the waste of resources, it is a missed opportunity to have empty space above shops, merely because consumers prefer shops at ground level. Indeed, it is often the resident population that prefers to be above ground level in the urban context. The places and spaces in a city should be public, to encourage social inclusivity. They need to be accessible and distinctive. The last of these features can be emphasised by associating the major city spaces with symbolic buildings. Movement needs to be based on good public transport systems, and preferably ones that are part of the infrastructure – such as trams and trains. One major objective is to control the use of motor vehicles. A number of projects have already been suggested in this regard. The benefits are conserving resources, reducing pollution and tackling congestion. If the city is made more compact, travel distances can be reduced and pedestrian movement increased. Since the abandonment of the New Town policy, the focus for development has returned to the existing cities. It can take many years to build up networks of activities where none exist. It is therefore important to work from the existing activities. One useful strategy is to extend out from successful areas. Finally, it is essential to recognise that development in the city will never be completed. The city is constantly changing and any plans must be sufficiently flexible to adapt to a city in process.
Analysis of Masterplanning’s Second Incarnation

This analysis results from the study of the following masterplans:

- King’s Cross Masterplan; Foster and Partners (undated) were appointed in 1987 to lead a consortium to plan this large site which did not take place, but a new masterplan is being prepared by Argent St George (undated)
- Poundbury, Dorchester, Dorset; A development by Prince Charles with a masterplan by Krier produced between 1988-91 (Krier, 1993b, p71-81)
- Crown Street, Gorbals, Glasgow; masterplan produced in 1990, modified in the mid 1990s and now being built
- Wellington Ave, Aldershot, Hampshire; architect Terry Farrell produced a masterplan in 1997, now going ahead (Rushmore Council, 1997)
- Kingston University site; masterplan for Kingston Hill site by Todd Architects, being built (Ryan, 1998)
- Stonehenge Masterplan, presented in 1999 to re-route roads, build a new visitors centre and change to landscape (English Heritage, undated) now going through planning procedure
- Proposed Swindon Masterplan; produced in 2000 by Urbaneye (Urbaneye, undated)
- Newcastle City Council’s Going for Growth; first Master Plans for the East and West of Newcastle (Newcastle City Council, 2000), partly based on work by Richard Rogers, who later resigned from the work over criticisms of the Council’s approach.
- Trafalgar Square; World Squares for All Masterplan by Norman Foster prepared in late 1990s, now underway aim to be finished by 2003 (Foster and Partners, 2000; & World Squares for All, undated)
- Cambridge expansion; masterplan by DEGW, under consultation and debate (DEGW, 2001)

By their nature, masterplans are produced by professionals – some would say experts. As such, they continue the theme of top down urban management. Apart from a little potential in the consultation phase, the community is effectively excluded from taking an active part. As masterplans have become more visionary, they have become more self contained and abstracted from the urban settings that they are supposed to enhance. There has been an accusation that, especially the architects, have become so obsessed with the images and details of the proposals that they have lost sight of the objectives for producing plans and that the plans have become an end in themselves. Yet, 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 masterplans become detailed representations of specific proposals, the more they become deterministic and inflexible. There is no doubt that masterplanning is aimed at the scheme as product rather than the city in process. Even Krier (1993b) admits that you can only have a masterplan if you have certainties. 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 tends to 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. In fact masterplanning is a tool of property-led urban regeneration. 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 to existing cities, even to the point of encouraging brown field development. 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. Paul Latham of the Regeneration Practice states a preference for neighbourhood plans which he describes as social, environmental and economic plans with a public realm spatial element. There is an argument that good masterplans should be able to embrace non-spatial phenomena, but there is a general view that it is not the case. Even some regeneration teams are becoming sceptical of masterplans because they tend to prioritise spatial planning at the expense of economic, social and cultural concerns. Furthermore, there is the suggestion that
masterplans may actually hinder regeneration by being too prescriptive and inflexible. Even the
terminology worries some people – Master has dictatorial connotations and Plan can imply rather
simplistic solutions and/or a fixed blueprint for action. From his experience Terry Farrell now concludes
that a process of reassessment, adjustment and reappraisal is necessary – and that may involve strategies
rather than plans (Allen, 2001). In some cases, cities or development areas put forward Frames of
Reference and Design Guides. Even large regeneration programmes such as Glasgow from mid 1980s,
Birmingham late 1980s and the Temple Bar area of Dublin from the early 1990s were based on these
principles. Healey (1998, p1) states that frameworks articulate views about how places may change over
the long term. They aim to address the quality of life in places in an integrated way, attempting to weave
together economic, social, environmental and physical dimensions of what makes up a place. These
Frameworks are less prescriptive and detailed than masterplans. Taylor (1998) argues that as each city is a
system, urban designers need knowledge of how a specific city may work. As all parts of a city are
connected and interact, a change in one area will effect others, so the design of different areas should not be
created in isolation. He continues that cities are dynamic and therefore planners need flexible structure
plans that include economic and social qualities and deal with a process rather than rigid and static
products of masterplans.

Figure 5: Natural, active, vibrant and untidy city centre – Amsterdam by Francis Tibbalds (omitted)

Urban Design is yet again going through changes. While a few years ago there were claims that in the
globalised economy, place no longer mattered, now there are growing concerns about place – whether for
business location, people’s sense of place and quality of life or environmental sustainability. The turning
away from concerns about social issues under the Tories has provoked a response with concerns about
urban decay and social exclusion (Healey, 1998). Concerns about the environment has led to a revival of traditional planning (Wong, 1998). The election of New Labour in 1997 has stimulated a debate about planning including a host of new Planning Policy Guidance, the Urban Task Force (1999), Urban White paper (DETR, 2000) and a new Green Paper on planning (DTLR, 2001). In general there are moves to more integrated planning including physical, economic and social issues. The aspiration is towards more organic planning rather than the imposed approach of the 1950s to 1970s, but also a strengthened role for planning compared to the 1980s and 1990s. Among the aims are to tackle urban decline, reduce the use of greenfield land, and limit urban sprawl and to improve the quality of design and the built environment. However it is not entirely clear what is the dominant policy structure – New Labour still embraces much of the Tories support for market lead decisions making, often through a range of partnerships. The New Green paper argues for even more streamlined decision making than under the Tories and to make sure planning works much better for business (DTLR, 2001). Healey (1998) suggests that the recent reassertion of planned planning, faces a choice of either conflict resolution based on regulation of use or wider place-making involving collaborative planning. Mike Davis, a noted author on urban subjects, proposes that areas in cities need on-going design advice – not episodic interventions. Kenneth Frampton, Professor of Architecture at Columbia University feels that judicious intervention rather than the utopian scope of the master plan would be more advantageous. He recommends fewer schemes and more stitching-together of the urban fabric (Billingham, 2001). 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 of change. A development brief would then give more detailed guidance for a specific site. The title of a masterplan is still included but is merely detailed guidance for a site, including a detailed three dimensional vision, implementation, costs, phasing and timing - thus really appearing as part of the building design process (Urban Design Group, 2001).

Conclusions
The objective for planners, urban designers, architects and constructors is Building Sustainable Cities; and all the policies, plans and designs are only a means to that end. It has been shown that masterplanning is part of the utopian methodology in urban design and is associated with grand plans. There seems to be a number of inconsistencies between this approach and the features of a sustainable city. For example, sustainability appears to be related to community and people, building on existing and mutually supportive activities and encouraging residency, public place and spaces, help for the local economy and the concept of the city as a process. Whereas masterplanning is generally a top-down approach by experts, often clearing out existing activities, creating large single use areas of private or ambiguous ownership. It also promotes the scheme as a product. At present, the term masterplan is used confusingly, to mean a wide variety of different kinds. By Design (DLTR/CABE, 2000) does not use it at all. Towards an Urban Renaissance (Urban Task Force, 1999) sees masterplans as a means of focusing on the visual impact of three-dimensional form. The Urban Design Guide (Urban Design Group, 2001) defines masterplans as having a role that is distinct from other forms of guidance, and seems to be related to the building design process rather than urban design. The Urban Design Group has also been reported as stating that designers are gripped by Masterplan Madness that offers no more than a seductive illusion of urban design (Editors, Architects’ Journal, 15/03/2001). Jon Rouse, Chief Executive of CABE, is critical of the fashionable masterplanning, as it stands. He says that there is a real risk of repeating the planning mistakes of the past. He also points out that public spaces generated by the private sector are not acceptable as all population groups should have a claim to the central symbolic places of a city (Melhuish, 2001). One of the biggest supporters of masterplanning is Terry Farrell. He notes that Masterplanning is simply a way of stating desired outcomes and setting out to achieve them in physical, material terms. However, he will not be carrying out any more masterplans. Unfortunately, the reasons are financial rather than philosophical. He claims that clients are calling in-tenders to masterplan run down inner-city areas which have become the soulless repository of thousands of cars. For the price of just one of those cars, and – more often than not – in only a few weeks, you are expected to redesign a city (Williams, 2001). Others have been more damning in their criticism. Alsop (2001) makes the final points that 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 masterplanning studies, undertaken by urban design pirates.
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