

analysis

FIELD HOUSE URBAN RICHIA VERD ESTATE PARK FRINGE

Urban Fringe: Sustainable extension or just urban sprawl? **Harriet Denny**s goes right to the edge to understand the value of this emerging landscape

The shepherds of southern Spain are experiencing disruption to their centuries-old tradition of transhumance – when the flocks are herded from the scorching plains of the south-west to summer pastures in the mountainous north – as their traditional sheep routes, or *canadas reales*, are blocked by over-zealous property developers. Now the sheep must make their way along the concrete paths of soulless estates, and navigate a new path through the asphalt maze of Madrid's sprawling suburbs.

This is the curse of the modern age, and one that is common to any city hinterland – an Eliotian wasteland where the landscape covers in the penumbra of the urban shadow. As city terrain it is unreal, with its expanses of derelict space; as countryside it is marred by man-made developments more suited to an industrial environment. The phenomenon has been termed 'urban sprawl', a proliferation of half-hearted attempts at community planning resulting in a confused and unappealing mixed-use landscape. Three things define it: low density, car-based development and segregated areas.

Philip E Graves, professor of economics at the University of Colorado, has been examining the reasons behind the creation of urban sprawl. He says: "Sprawl can be defined as

any undesirable decentralisation of an urban area. Many people are moving from large central areas to the suburbs because governments in central cities often provide very low levels of public goods, such as school quality or safety from crime. Our cities, while wonderful in many respects, are not what they should be.

"Life today is a trade-off between a desire for land and housing at higher incomes and incurring the high costs necessitated by commuter travel. Those who strongly dislike commuting and have modest demands for housing will tend to remain in the cities, while those who have high relative demands for housing are more likely to endure a daily commute. The cost of commuting is measured not just in terms of the time spent in daily travel, but also by the losses in density-dependent urban goods such as culture and restaurant diversity." Net result: neither suburbanites nor city-dwellers are really happy.

One social implication of urban sprawl is that people become alienated in their neighbourhoods, as their in-built distance means that they become simply a place to drive to and from. Dependence on the car also has implications for the spread of obesity – a concern that is fast becoming a political issue. A recent survey by the *American Journal of*

Public Health revealed that the weight of people in a particular district could be calculated simply by taking an aerial photograph – the more spread-out the houses, the fatter its inhabitants. The shocking final statistic was that people living in sprawling areas weighed on average nearly 3kg more than their densely housed counterparts.

regeneration games

So if compact neighbourhoods encourage healthier, more socially integrated residents, is high-density housing the answer to all our planning prayers? Should we also increase the provision of urban public goods to prevent massive population outflows to the suburbs? John Prescott's response to long-running petition from planning, landscape and other practitioners, outlined in a 1998 Government white paper on urban regeneration and consolidated by last year's Communities Plan, is to stress the need to increase housing density to up to 80 homes per hectare (up from 23 per hectare) and to use brownfield derelict land as a means of bringing cities to life again through well-designed, compact communities with populations high enough to make transport and urban goods viable.

This echoes the Landscape Institute's belief that pressure must be kept up on developers

and planners to find suitable brownfield sites and invest in effective remediation. In their response to the September 2000 RTPI discussion paper on green belt policy, the Institute supported the protection of existing green belt designations that effectively prevent developers taking the low-cost option of green field development over the higher cost and increased responsibility of brownfield sites.

Henry Oliver, head of planning for the Campaign to Protect Rural England, approves of the drive to raise the proportion of new homes built on brownfield land. He says: "We believe the Government should raise its sights even higher, to aim for at least 75 per cent of new housing on previously developed land. By sticking to its 60 per cent target, the Government risks slowing further progress and sacrificing countryside to unnecessary greenfield development."

But can John Prescott's desire for sustainable communities – the "urban villages" of the future – be reconciled with his drive to

smother every inch of Britain's brownfield land with new development? There is bitter disagreement amongst landscape professionals over whether we are right to deny ourselves the room to spread out in this way – studies have shown that we could carry on building at our current rates for another 50 years and still 70 per cent of our land would not be covered. Furthermore, the postwar planning disasters have resulted in an ingrained aversion to high-density schemes in the minds of the British population. A recent study conducted by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors reported that 77 per cent of people questioned said they would not consider living in a [purpose-built] flat. ▶▶▶p23



"Rural urban fringe greenbelt should be so much more than just a means of holding back urban sprawl." Andrew Gale

FOOTPATH

Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) is one such tool, providing a means of pinpointing what makes a locality different from its neighbouring areas.

In short, LCA captures the distinctive characteristics of a landscape and promotes understanding of how landscapes have evolved. This information can be used to enhance local distinctiveness and guide sustainable development that meets the needs of local people.

The scalable nature of LCA offers an ideal framework for guiding planning and development in urban fringe areas. The approach characterises the landscape according to a set of national Countryside Character Areas, which are in turn sub-divided into more locally specific Landscape Character Areas. By working at different scales, LCA allows us to look beyond the prescribed boundaries of the urban fringe and where necessary, draw inspiration from the character of neighbouring areas. In this way, LCA helps us to envisage the urban fringe within the context of the wider landscape – a perspective that is key to identifying the roots of character, or sense of place, in areas that might otherwise be dubbed placeless, or characterless.

For more than ten years, the Environment Agency and its predecessor, the National Rivers Authority, has utilised LCA as the basis for understanding river landscapes. Assessments are undertaken at both the catchment level and at a local scale, often involving the use of a Geographical Information System (GIS) to store and analyse spatially referenced landscape information. Moreover, LCA has proved to be an effective means of facilitating community involvement in the landscape planning process.

Says Richard Copas of the Environment Agency: "Landscape Character Assessment has made it possible to bridge the gap between communities and organisations who would otherwise neglect the area beyond their political boundaries and direct interests. It has allowed us gain a mutual understanding of the state of the river environment, its features and how they are valued."

Similarly, in the case of canal developments, British Waterways have used LCA as the basis for co-ordinating a wide range of public, private and voluntary organisations. Landscape architects at British Waterways have developed a range of techniques to assess the linear qualities of canals, from inner urban areas to tranquil countryside, where the view from the towpath, or from a boat, may be several miles wide. LCA has also been used to guide regeneration initiatives and environmental improvements, that have promoted investment in the canalside urban fringe.

Communities, developers, land managers and planning professionals all have a role in identifying the unique characteristics of a particular landscape, and in using

this information to plan and manage landscape change.

In the case of the Great North Forest, an LCA-based approach was used to bring those involved in planning and managing the urban fringe together with local communities, to produce a management strategy for each of the identified Local Management Zones (LMZs). This strategy comprises a list of actions needed to achieve beneficial change, and has helped to stimulate wider debate and encourage stakeholders to co-ordinate their efforts at a strategic level, irrespective of resources or ownership.

A common criticism of the LCA approach is that in some cases, it is used to simply resist change or protect features in areas subject to development, rather than being used to contribute to the process of creating sustainable places.

There needs to be a much greater understanding of how landscape character can influence change, and arguably more creative thought given to how evolving landscapes can retain identity and character. Says Frazer Osment of Landscape Design Associates: "We must worry less about the existing physical appearance of the landscapes that surround our town and cities, and turn our attention to the creative task of designing new landscapes that can accommodate the demands placed on them by evolving settlements. The key question then becomes, how does landscape character assessment actually inform the planning and design process at the urban fringe? Consideration of this question could lead back down the same blind alley to 'hopeful protectionism'. It shouldn't!

"LCA can usefully inform an understanding of the basic relationship between town and country, the way that a settlement relates to its landscape context, and how that relationship contributes to its image and identity. This approach not only requires greater acceptance of change, but more determination that change will be positive. Hence, if we really want to see a better urban fringe in the future, those of us interested in landscape character are going to have to ensure that we are an integral part of the planning process."

Paul Mahony and Jonathan Porter are directors of Countryside, an inter-disciplinary consultancy combining expertise in design and media, geographical information and landscape ecology. Countryside is currently co-ordinating the Countryside Character Network, supported by the Countryside Agency. email: paul@countryside.org This article is based on the proceedings of the Countryside Character Network (CCN) workshop, entitled Linking Town and Country: Landscape Character in the Urban Fringe.

The CCN is a free network, open to anyone with an interest in Landscape Character Assessment and its applications. For more information, visit the CCN website at www.ccnetwork.org.uk.

CANALS



Regeneration has promoted investment in the canalside urban fringe

landscape character in the urban fringe

Paul Mahony and Jonathan Porter find landscape character assessment a useful tool in defining the urban fringe

Until recent years, the interface between urban and rural landscapes had been somewhat overlooked in the grand scheme of sustainable development. Politically, the urban fringe is a 'no man's land' into which little research, or funding, has dared venture. However, an increased appreciation of the urban fringe as a vital means of linking town and country means such landscapes are recognised as performing a multitude of functions for society, including recreation, agriculture, transport and nature conservation. Before we put shovel to soil, we must first understand the character of urban fringe landscapes, or else risk losing the very qualities that will ensure their future sustainability.

One of the greatest challenges facing development in the urban fringe is tackling the diversity of landscape types adjacent to urban areas. It's no longer a case of describing the urban fringe as a 'zone of transition', – from mainly rural, to mainly urban. Rather, it is now more widely perceived as land lying between urban areas and countryside, with its own distinctive characteristics. Hence, a tool is required to tease apart the elements that define each urban fringe landscape, so that development may be guided by a sense of place, as well as function.

BRIDGE

analysis



Cities can be turned 'inside out' by networks of greenways linking larger blocks of urban space



greenspace invaders

David Nicholson-Lord, environmental writer and former environment editor of the *Independent on Sunday*, argues that while the disconnection of people and nature imposed by industrialisation and urbanisation over the last two centuries persists, cities will remain places from which people wish to escape. This desire for space – described by sociologists as a “force deep in the English psyche” – is only aggravated by high-density cities, which create feelings of claustrophobia, of being shut in.

“Sustainable Communities is a deeply flawed project,” he warns, “because fundamentally it is addressing the issue of a need for more homes from a technical, rather than a human, perspective. The human need for space and for greenery has been lost in the stampede: a moral panic has arisen from the mass exodus from our cities over the past 30 or 40 years. The effect of this scheme will be to create a residential monoculture – row upon row of dreary-looking streets with little architectural merit. Brownfield sites have more human and conservation potential than many green fields; town cramming will not meet human needs; and compact cities are a planning disaster in the making.”

Evidence has accumulated over the last two decades that the ‘double indoors’ of office and city is harmful for human health, creating psychological stress as well as bodily disorders. Greenery, by contrast, is therapeutic, relieving stress and aggression and promoting

creativity and healing. “People need greenery for physical, mental and spiritual health,” says David Nicholson-Lord. “There is pressure on greenfield sites because the cities are so bloody awful; if we give city dwellers access to open spaces, this pressure will subside and the expansion of urban areas will be arrested. Making cities sustainable is about undesigning them so that they fulfil an individual’s need to connect with nature.”

Cities can be turned ‘inside out’ by networks of greenways linking up with larger blocks of urban space, from parks and commons to urban forests, wetlands, river floodplains and city farms. These in-built green spaces bring the countryside into the

city and improve the quality of life for urban residents. David Nicholson-Lord’s attitude to the green belt is more ambivalent than that of some of his contemporaries. He says: “The green belt should not necessarily be a fixed ‘belt’; it should wind in and out of built-up areas, interweaving town and country. In this way, everyone can live within walking distance of a green space.” Andrew Gale, senior policy advisor for the Countryside Agency, agrees that a variety of open spaces are essential for people’s well-being – ranging from urban brownfields to open rural

countryside – and that these spaces should be interlinked. He says: “An important part of the solution is the strategic supply of accessible green spaces in and around urban areas linking town and country.”

LI past president David Jarvis’s approach is that in some instances, city edges should be permitted to “bulge” slightly in order to create an attractive, functional and sustainable outer limit to the city. Describing this “modern-day-refinement”, he says: “We need to examine the capability of each fringe landscape to absorb expansion so that new buildings reflect the Landscape Character Area designation. There is no hard-and-fast rule to say that we should freeze city limits. We need to focus on making

“The green belt should wind in and out of built-up areas, interweaving town and country. In this way everyone can live within walking distance of a green space”

the outer edge acceptable, and this may mean that the green belt fluctuates in width.”

fringe benefits

Heading out towards the countryside, away from the reclaimed land of the inner city, is the rural urban fringe. The Bartlett School of Planning has advised that there is no national or international consensus on the definition of either the urban or the rural urban fringe – these areas are impossible to delineate on a map or describe in a way that satisfies everyone. ▶▶▶p24



Thames Gateway, the largest brownfield site in England, where John Prescott aims to build 120,000 new homes by 2005



For the purposes of the Countryside Agency, the rural urban fringe is the place where “rural and urban areas meet and mingle to produce landscapes that are clearly distinct from the wider countryside”. “These areas are often misunderstood in negative terms as being poor-quality landscapes,” says Andrew Gale. “Our position is that the environmental, social and economic benefits to be accrued from the rural urban fringe far outweigh the localised challenges of addressing such problems. Fringe landscapes are not always low quality – for example, some areas of outstanding natural beauty extend into fringe areas.”

The Countryside Agency’s vision for the rural urban fringe is outlined in a collaborative consultation document with Groundwork (January 2004). “The potential of the rural urban fringe is presently unrealised, making it a poor advertisement for both country and town,” says Andrew Gale. “We assert that community forestry and countryside management schemes can effect a significant change to the quality and contribution of the rural urban fringe. We are aiming to help the Government realise its aspirations in areas such as greater social inclusion; improving levels of exercise and health; regional prosperity and rural–urban interdependence.” Throughout 2004/5, the Countryside Agency will assess the potential of Area Action Plans, which are being incorporated into a PPS: one of the planning policy statements being drafted to replace the PPG series of guidance notes.

Britain’s inland waterways form a network of more than 2,000 miles of canals and river-based navigations, and as such link town and country and provide excellent opportunities for urban and rural regeneration initiatives –

canals and their towpaths are often the most straightforward means of accessing the urban fringe and the countryside around towns. But the most developed and integrated model of landscape regeneration around urban areas in England is the 12 Community Forests. Established in 1989 to regenerate some 1,750 square miles of countryside and greenspace in and around 12 major conurbations, the forests are now leading exponents of environmentally led regeneration in England’s greenbelt.

The Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England would like to see a planning system that protects the countryside; improves the design and layout of new development; addresses sustainability imperatives (for example emissions, energy and transport); enforces decisions; maintains the resources needed to effect change; and offers more opportunities for public engagement. However, the proposed changes to guidance on the countryside are perceived as “the most serious threat to the countryside by the current government”: it is felt that the PPS7 policy statement is poorly drafted, confuses principles and objectives, and has an entrepreneurial bias.

Tom Oliver, head of rural policy for CPRE, explains: “PPS7 is not interested in the character of the countryside and it rules out local authority designations altogether. The draft statement fails to recognise the value of the ordinary English countryside to the nation – its biodiversity, agricultural importance and natural productivity. What is more, it threatens to break the link between the rural community and land management. It offers, in effect, a developers’ charter – incentives to diversify away from agricultural developments.”

Recognising that the landscape value of many green belts is being gradually eroded, the Landscape Institute stated: “It is essential that the landscape character and visual characteristics of green belts are more fully understood, so that human requirements can be located sensitively and appropriately.”

Professor Robert Tregay, Senior Partner of Landscape Design Associates (LDA), stresses the need to plan creatively for the urban fringe. His practice prepared a green belt study as part of its vision for the city of Cambridge.

He says: “It is imperative to take in the wider landscape setting of the city and urban open space in a fully integrated manner. In Cambridge, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to integrate two key facets of green belt policy: to protect the historic character and compact scale of the city, and to plan for positive uses of landscape within the green belt. With good planning, it is possible to use the development process to ensure limited and well-designed urban extensions to help deliver these positive benefits.

“Green belt policy can therefore be applied creatively – to connect the city to its landscape setting in a functional way, and not just to prevent urban sprawl.”

LDA is currently masterplanning some of the larger urban extensions around Cambridge (including mixed-use schemes of up to 12,000 new homes) and is looking to put these principles into practice. New country parks and better access to the countryside were proposed in their green belt study, with links to the new wetland landscapes at Wicken Fen being planned by the National Trust.

LDA is also planning most of the new green infrastructure in the Thames Gateway Growth Area, presented by the Government as symbolic of its commitment to the regeneration of such areas. Here, the proposed Green Grid will need to be multi-functional. Every area of urban fringe, urban park or countryside close to town – whether green belt or not – will need to achieve a range of benefits from the limited land resource. The green infrastructure must serve the needs of flood management, biodiversity, recreation and many other uses.

Ebenzer Howard’s *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, published in 1902, decried an “unholy, unnatural separation of society and nature”, and envisaged small, nucleated towns taken up by private gardens and farmland and separated by swathes of open country. This idyll will seem quaintly utopian to many, and will remain so while governmental thinking favours policy over people. ■

View the Countryside Agency’s Vision for the Rural Urban Fringe consultation document at www.countryside.gov.uk or www.groundwork.org.uk.