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The Urban Village: an obituary?

Introduction

The Urban Village idea has been around since 1990, and it is a concept that has often been used during the subsequent decade by development professionals, including urban designers. This brief article reviews the results of some recent research which considers how the concept has evolved over the decade, and also whether the urban village vision has been matched by development 'realities'.

Why did the urban village concept arise?

The urban village concept was produced as a reaction of a development elite to perceived problems with urban development and planning, and in particular themes common to urban design such as dissatisfaction with environments resulting from zoning and also the bland characteristics of speculative housing. This reaction was fuelled by the Prince of Wales, but the flame was carried forward by a range of development professionals who endorsed these wider held concerns, including property developers, house builders, planners, architects, urban designers and even the odd bank. This Urban Villages Group toured the country and tried to understand places that 'work', planning history was selectively raided to unearth and reinvigorate the rather tarnished neighbourhood concept, whilst reviews of more recent thinking about sustainability and urban design were also done to explore what else might be used to give shape to their concept. This resulted in development principles being written down whilst the forum also spelt out the process necessary for building the urban village.

How did the idea get disseminated

Following the publications, the members of the Urban Villages Forum promoted their concept. As a result of widening interest the Urban Villages Forum was established in 1993. In addition development interests in the Group formed the Urban Villages Company in an attempt to profit from the vision and also turn the vision into a new-build reality. The company lasted until 1995 when the Group started, instead, to support other types of development that had an urban village flavour. It did this by endorsing actual developments (Poundbury and Crown Street were often referred to), promoting the concept to local authorities and development agencies, becoming involved in emerging policy debates such as the work of the Urban Task Force, and also lobbying Government to get their concept included in Planning Policy Guidance, where it subsequently appeared as a term in PPG1.

Tensions

The loose nature of the urban village concept has meant that different people have thought that it is a good idea for a variety of reasons, but ultimately this has also led to a number of tensions as priorities between actors have varied. This can roughly be illustrated by suggesting that the ideal urban village would be slightly different for different interests, and that these interests have become more or less evident during the time of the Forum:

- Aesthetic or historicist interest – The Prince of Wales has always promoted a concern for the art of building places, and was originally keen to endorse the historicist vision of Poundbury as a model for urban village schemes. This has been something that others have been less keen to do.
- New build neighbourhood –The commercial property development interests were keen to be involved with the development of a new-build urban village on either a green- or brownfield site. Involvement with the Forum has been regarded as a way in which this more commercial of motivations might have been realised. It wasn't.
- Urban renewal – Following the failure of the property development interests to get their new build scheme off the ground, an interest in urban renewal emerged. The urban village became regarded as an appropriate vision to apply to the regeneration of run down inner (or outer) city areas.

This evolving vision of where urban villages might ultimately be developed and what form they might take has resulted in changes in the membership of the Forum over the years, with the property development interests in particular becoming less involved.

In addition, however, following the introduction of urban villages into Planning Policy Guidance the concept has been 'read' in a variety of ways by local actors, and urban village principles have been 'shoehorned' into being responsive to a range of local circumstances. This process has been partially endorsed by the Urban Villages Forum who have been looking to demonstrate the practical value of their ideas by being able to refer to actual schemes. It has also been reinforced by a weakening 'ownership' of the concept by the Urban Village Forum. Because the concept and the term have been successfully disseminated the term has also been borrowed as a badge for a range of development situations, including house builder schemes that share little in common with the urban village idea.

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Urban Villages in Practice

As a result of a national survey, 55 developments termed 'urban villages' have been identified. The schemes demonstrate a great variety of characteristics with schemes of different sizes being presented as urban villages, with sizes varying from just over one hectare (Attercliffe in Sheffield) to nearly 300 hectares (Swanpool in Lincoln). Projected populations of these developments also range vastly from 160 to 15,000 with a fairly even distribution in between. This has led us to conclude that there is not much consistency in how the urban village idea is being adopted by development professionals and subsequently used in development practice.

Do urban villages exist?

The urban village is a loose, almost anecdotal conceptualisation bringing together a wide range of ideas and associations (principles of urban design, principles of sustainable development, neighbourhood concepts etc). This allows for a wide degree of flexibility on the part of those people who use the concept, whilst notions of what the concept might mean remain contested. The Urban Village Forum unsuccessfully tries to control the use of the concept (defining schemes that might be referred to as an Urban Village) whilst the concept has also evolved as the Urban Village Forum has changed its form and membership. The concept is vague and that is what makes it applicable in a variety of situations. This also makes it both useful and useless. Useful because it has some value in wider planning discourses allowing people to legitimate developments. Useless as a fixed model that can be applied in different situations

Fixing and unfixing an idea

There is a desire both to fix the concept and to make it local and contingent. Fixing the concept has resulted from attempts to unite actors and provide a common voice, but also attempts to make the concept exclusive and say what might be included or excluded from urban village schemes. Fixing the concept also gives it some value in planning discourse where some consensus exists about the development principles that characterise urban villages. The Urban Village books are a good example of this. Making the concept local and contingent has resulted from the institutionalisation of the concept and the extent to which actors have had a vested interest in the concept and its practical application. The 'search' for urban villages has led to a significant loosening of definitions as the concept has been confronted by localities. The term has also become a badge seen as a shorthand for getting resources and consents to develop. The promotion of the urban village concept is therefore one of negotiation between the generic and the specific.

Anything mixed use becomes an urban village

Urban villages seem to exhibit a fair degree of variety. However, justifications for calling developments 'urban villages' are broadly similar (mixed use, sustainable, community-building etc.). This reflects the textualised nature of planning work and the tension between this, built form and lived experience. Planning is an attempt to define discursive objects and deal with them (or categorise them). The process of naming a development an 'urban village' lends it some stability and therefore a deeper legitimacy within the discourse of planning regardless of its form or what it is actually like to live there. #

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Top: Hulme High Street, Mancheste, a high street in name only
Middle: Poundbury, Dorset and Above: Silvertown, East London. Two projects which have shared the title "urban village" but which are very different in form and character