All grown up? The urban journey

Cities — and the people living in them — have evolved rapidly over recent decades. *Jon Herbert* looks at what has changed and what has stayed the same.

Appearances are deceptive. Satellite dishes aside, many urban centres remain defined by their aging Victorian and Edwardian housing stock. In reality, we have actually morphed and modified what is now known as the "built environment" continuously over the past 70 years. Modern city living continues to evolve at a frenetic pace. The people, and the lives of people, are changing, too.

Contemporary urban living is an unfinished story of transition as politics and policy, economics and philosophical pressures compete in constant motion. It is an important tale to follow for many reasons.

Increasingly, the environment has emerged as a top social and political priority, linked to health and wellbeing. Creating a sustainable city-centre environment has implications for both town planners and business planners. It opens commercial opportunities, with energy and technology as key examples.

In half a century, energy systems have transformed cities. Coal smoke has been replaced by hydrocarbons, renewables and energy-efficiency drives. Combustion engines are slowly giving way to hybrids, electric cars and clean mass transit systems. Digital communication is giving communities a new nervous system — and will continue to redefine the urban living experience for years to come.

Same old problems

Yet, since the mid-1940s, some problems have remained the same. There was an acute housing shortage then and there is an acute housing shortage now. Fifty years ago there were fewer cars on urban streets because there were fewer cars. Today, there are fewer cars because of deliberate pedestrianisation and congestion charges. The bicycle is no longer a necessity but a choice transport mode. However, public transport systems still struggle to wind their way effectively through the post-Victorian landscape.

Increasing change is to be seen today, particularly in the conception and design of functional urban spaces that encourage and support sustainable behaviour on the part of well-informed citizens. More attention is being paid to the impact of green spaces. Communal living attempts to avoid the worst of unsuccessful rehousing schemes introduced in the mid-twentieth century. Individual human needs are taken into greater account.

Global trend

However, despite the pressures of living in conurbations, the world's population continues to flock from the countryside to the city. A report by the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate has concluded that an additional two billion people are expected to make their homes and livelihoods within the built environment in the coming decades.

The critical role of future cities is reinforced by the findings of a recent report published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*.

It warns that restricting population growth will not solve global environment and sustainability problems in the short term and that the total number of humans on the planet in 85 years' time — at the end of this century — could rise from the current 7 billion to up to 12 billion.

The study, *Human Population Reduction Is Not a Quick Fix for Environmental Problems*, notes that 14% of all people who have ever lived are alive today and driving increasing urbanisation as a series of crises hit the rural world.

Even a mid-century third world war that could cost 2 billion lives would only marginally depress the trend of global population growth over the next 100 years, warns Professor Corey Bradshaw of the University of Adelaide.

Never-ending journey

The UK's urban journey from the 1940s to the 2010s has been a complex one.

Victorian and Edwardian brick terraces have given way to ribbons of suburban development, the semis of the 1930s, sacrosanct greenbelt and long commuter journeys. Urban population trends have changed dramatically in parallel. In London, Westminster's population fell from 347,000 in 1939 to 172,000 in 1988, before increasing again to 219,000 in 2011. Today, the capital is desperately short of suitable homes.

Meanwhile, the sons, daughters and even grandchildren of people who for many personal reasons moved out of traditional city centres now travel daily at considerable expense across swathes of Green Belt to well-paying jobs in metropolitan city centres — often to and from their parents' home. Home ownership has become a dream ambition.

High-density living

Inventing innovative ways for many people to live and work successfully and relatively happily cheek by jowl in busy towns and cities has been a long-standing British obsession and objective.

The first strategic move to high-density living began in the 1960s with the early tower blocks. The aim was a social revolution. Tall, glass-covered buildings to free humanity. Hygiene and light. At the time, Scotland had 400,000 homes with no indoor toilet. During this period, Britain built a higher proportion of state-subsidised housing than even the most ambitious communist states of eastern Europe.

Tower blocks seemed to be the ultimate housing solution — with post-war prefabs also in the running. Municipal leaders grabbed this new heaven-sent accommodation opportunity. Progressive architects loved tower blocks. Surely, the demolition of slums would leave populations who wanted to stay in their locale, it was argued. There was also pressure to keep votes and tax bases within local authority boundaries.

The towers went up in city centres, on waste ground and where Victorian rat-ridden terraces had just been bulldozed away. The added incentive introduced in 1958 was a central government subsidy for every floor over and above the first five storeys. The towers rose like grass.

There were benefits, too. Heating, proper sanitation, kitchens and bathrooms, plus space enough for children not to have to share beds. However, a lack of cash meant that quickly-built solutions put up by local companies took priority. The more refined blocks were seldom built.

The problem was that everywhere began to look the same, as it often does today, 60 years on. The red-sandstone Glasgow tenements, crimson-brick London apartments and Manchester's back-to-backs were replaced by generic concrete and steel towers.

But the aim was to get people housed. Glasgow saw the 31-storey Red Road flats built rapidly. Newcastle had the snaking Byker Wall housing development. However, asbestos, condensation, distant shops and disrepair took their toll: vertical communities did not integrate too well and vandalism became a major social problem.

In May 1968, a gas explosion killed four at Ronan Point. During the 1970s, many authorities began to blow up their tower blocks. Rochester demolished every one of its towers to improve the urban view; Birmingham thought likewise. The Red Road flats were considered. Wandsworth tried a different approach, covering its blocks with bright coloured panels. Cottage-style housing came into vogue.

Initially, 500,000 temporary prefab houses were planned. Of the 156,623 actually constructed between 1945 and 1951 — which with their built-in fridges and bathrooms became the proud homes of new occupants and the envy of their friends and neighbours — many remained occupied for decades longer than the 10-year life they were originally planned for. A number still stand today. Council house sales in the 1980s either saw properties being improved from the inside by proud new owners, sold off to housing associations, or left for the not so well-off.

Vertical thinking

However, Britain's urban footprint may have gained overall from the long experiment. It is argued that going upwards prevented urban sprawl at a critical moment. Modern tower blocks, such as Manchester's 47-storey Beetham Tower, are now promoted for elite living.

Meanwhile, British architects are as keen as ever to develop high-density living solutions, but today look to clever street patterns, squares and more attractive low-rise housing to achieve the same aims. It is a measure of their success that UK expertise in producing effective high-density communities is of considerable interest in China.

In fact, the contemporary emphasis is on medium-density housing which is not too high and not too low. The idea that increasing density is the sustainable way forward and that height is the primary answer is being questioned.

Some say that the right density is where a local population is concentrated enough to ensure vibrant community streets, shops and entertainment facilities, but not so dense that people are isolated in upper storeys. Another definition is that communities should support cycle and public transit systems, but not at density levels where subways and large underground car park garaging are needed. It is about achieving a balance between building a sense of community versus creating anonymity.

Green spaces

A study by the University of Exeter also noted that parks, gardens and green spaces improve both the wellbeing and quality of life of urban dwellers. Data collected over 17 years from 5000 households could help to inform future urban planning and community health decisions, the researchers believe.

The 10,000 adults followed as they moved home across Britain between 1991 and 2008 reported less mental distress and higher life satisfaction in "greener" areas.

In context, the effect of green spaces was loosely qualified as being roughly equivalent emotionally to a third of the impact of being married. This was irrespective of income, employment, physical health and housing type. The benefits of urban green spaces are even more significant when multiplied by the number of individual people, and their children, who share them.

Digital density

And then, there is the virtual urban world — where space is more of a server problem!

The unstoppable digital revolution means that the merging of the physical world and the digitally constructed world will continue to grow and occupy a greater cognitive space in the public mind.

Where you are at a particular moment will be increasingly important. Big data will reveal behaviour patterns and trends that you as an individual and dedicated consumer may not even be aware that you are part of.

From a municipal perspective, the evolving digital environment will increase opportunities to send good citizenship messages and by return collect your views on public resources.

From a commercial viewpoint, it will be difficult to escape perfectly targeted advertising that brings together your immediate location, who you are with and your purchasing history. The upshot might be that your mobile device tells you that you just happen to be standing next to the right boutique to satisfy your retail therapy needs!

There are, of course, many other potentially beneficial aspects of digital integration. Monitoring your regular activities, travel patterns and personal preferences will make it much easier to harmonise public transport systems at peak and off-peak times. Remote health monitoring could make the use of high-cost health resources within urban communities much more effective.

Planning major investment and infrastructure policies could become much more efficient, too, when huge volumes of genuine real information are used. This could open the door for pre-crisis planning as an alternative for post-crisis intervention across many aspects of community and national life.

Whatever tomorrow's urban world turns out to be, many inevitable tough decisions could be made much more easily when hard information is available to innovators, planners, entrepreneurs, supply chain managers, consumers and private citizens.

The weighted conclusions will shape and define the UK's future urban environment. ■

London's unique case

London provides a unique precedent. More than 8.6 million people now live and work in the capital, with the city's population expected to grow to 11 million by 2050. And they all need an attractive place in the right location to call home.

With a population density of 5197 people per square kilometre, the British capital is now the largest city in Europe. And as one of the world's super-cities, drawing in international trade and investment, London is under growing pressure to provide more community infrastructure, including owner-occupied houses and rental accommodation.

According to the Mayor of London's Office, not only has the cosmopolitan population expanded by about 2 million over the last quarter century, average life expectancy has also increased from 62 in 1939 to 82 today.

The latest population figures surpass the total for 1939. Perhaps surprisingly, the wartime blitz and development of new satellite towns and commuter communities in the southeast caused a resident drift out to suburbia that has been slow to recover, despite the perception that modern London is overcrowded.

Greater London Authority data shows that the inner London population continued to drop between the 1940s and late 1980s. The Westminster case is an illustrative example.

New economic opportunities in the southeast have drawn people to the capital from the UK regions; a boost in international immigration in the last 10 years has also elevated the total number of residents. Both trends are likely to continue.

The mayor's report has predicted a 37% population increase by mid-century, posing infrastructure challenges that could cost £1.3 trillion to meet, including the provision of 50,000 new homes every year.

Until 2025, expansion will be on brownfield land; there is to be no building on Green Belt. Transport, energy and water supply are also priority projects.

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