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NEW TOWNS – ECO-TOWNS?

PROFESSOR HOWARD LIDDELL OF GAIA ARCHITECTS OUTLINES THE THOUGHTS HE PRESENTED ON NEW TOWNS AS EXEMPLAR ECO-TOWNS.

During the course of the last 25 years of Gaia Architects there has been a steady flow of potential clients coming to the office with proposals for either:

- a new eco-house, where 90% don't have either a site or the money or both (roughly one per month),
- a new eco-village, where 50% don't have a site and 90% don't have the money (roughly one per six months)
- a new eco-town where 99% are either proposed for toxic brownfield sites where they hope to magically 'ecologise' the problem as an exercise in Lady Macbeth scale futility or a greenfield site representing thinly-veiled camouflage for a farmer's retirement package and almost always in contravention of the Local Plan (roughly one per two years but they do have the advantage of often being exotic and take us on occasional trips round Europe).

Eco-towns have the potential to set the mainstream delivery of sustainable cities back another ten years. So a plea was made for no more 0.1% green whipping boys living the good life on behalf

of the rest of us, whilst the other 99.9% continue on with their merry profligacy, waiting to see when to make a move. I have been watching pilot projects for the past 30 years – what more is there to know?

There is a real hurry in this. To have any hope whatsoever of meeting current government policies and targets on sustainability and climate change we need 100% of construction to be green and indeed even that will not suffice.

CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS

Let us look at just one of the current UK/Scottish Government targets (for all the statistics below read roughly 10% for Scotland).

In the UK we are currently building about 250,000 new houses per annum. We are building roughly the equivalent square metreage in non-domestic buildings and repairing and maintaining about as much again as both put together. Altogether this represents the square metre equivalent of 1 million homes per annum – half refurbishment and half new build.

To meet the agreed national carbon reduction targets of improving on 1990 energy consumption by 2050 – given that we are now (in 2010) already using 30% more than we did in the benchmark year of 1990 – we actually need to improve by 110% over current levels. In short this would require us to be building the equivalent of over 500,000 new houses per annum and



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refurbishing the equivalent of one million houses per annum with every single building being built (without exception or special pleading – Homes for Scotland please note) to 110% better energy standard than now. This means twice the amount of new building and four times more refurbishment than we were achieving two years ago. This would represent the biggest increase in building construction activity in the history of the UK by a factor of at least two. This, however, sits in the context of a credit crunch and the Government's own statistics showing an actual downturn in construction activity over the past two years. I sincerely hope that other sectors are achieving better results than construction, but the likelihood of achieving the current carbon reduction targets is almost zero.

AND NOW...

During the recent New Towns debate during the Festival of Politics a number of further issues were aired; that we need to be concentrating on existing settlements and especially developing next to transport modes and existing core facilities and infrastructure, and looking to a new future with different modes of living both in technical and behavioural terms.

Excellent exemplar case studies exist going back over twenty years – e.g., developments in Germany, such as Freiburg and Tübingen as mixed developments with both refurbishment and

newbuild and Emscher Park. The latter is a ten year, whole valley-scale initiative bringing back 17 towns and cities from the brink of conurbation and using infrastructural landscaping and iconic buildings to reinforce the separate identities within a shared parkland.

The Western Harbour at Malmö in Sweden is a shining example of the value of the Berlin 50% rule (one square metre of biodiverse rich landscapes for every square metre of concrete). Viikkii in Finland with its five indicators, including food growing and materials choice, and high scores as a trigger for releasing more developer land is of interest. Even BedZed and Stroud in England and our own home-grown Fairfield in Perth, have much from which to learn. These all go back well over a decade and have already pioneered, piloted and generally exhausted the eco-neighbourhood options. So, now it has been done it is time to mainstream it.

New Towns – who needs them? Not even Mrs Brundtland's children.

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