



# Sustainable Urbanism

The city as an eco-system



jtp

JOHN THOMPSON & PARTNERS  
urbanism + architecture



# Sustainable Urbanism

## The city as an eco-system

Whenever I experience a city during rush hour, I am always reminded of Godfrey Reggio's remarkable film 'Koyaanisqatsi' in which he juxtaposes images of frenzied metropolitan life with the quiet majesty of the natural world. The film's title is a Hopi Indian word meaning 'life out of balance', and the director's choice of imagery - traffic congestion, urban decay, pollution, and harassed hordes of people on choked streets - makes you question whether our urban environments could ever emulate the efficacy of a natural eco-system.

In many ways concentrations of population could, and should, be the most sustainable form of human development. Unlike their suburban counterparts that sprawl out across the landscape, the best mixed-use city neighbourhoods are compact and efficient, help produce economic synergies, encourage the sharing of resources such as public transport, and act as containers for healthy social interaction. They are also vibrant, culturally diverse and stimulating places to live despite their many shortcomings in terms of quality of life. Advertisements for laptops and mobile phones often play on this by offering us the dream of working elsewhere – like the beach or the countryside – places that are the very antithesis of the metropolis. Yet despite these technologically enabled opportunities, people still favour the city and all that comes with living in close physical proximity with others.

At Charter Quay in Kingston-upon-Thames John Thompson & Partners have delivered a new mixed-use waterfront quarter:

A new theatre, cafés, restaurants and shops make it a lively social place and high density housing takes advantage of views and proximity to the town centre. New wildlife habitats along the Thames allow integration of ecologically-led landscaping.



### **Socially Sustainable Urban Form**

Human interaction is, of course, the very reason towns and cities emerged in the first place – being physical environments that facilitated the social, economic, spiritual, cultural and civic exchange of goods, services and ideologies. The onset of the Industrial Revolution triggered a reconfiguration of these established settlements and turned them into centres of manufacturing and employment that housed huge labour markets. This accelerated pace of growth led to planned rather than organic development and although we should not romanticise these cities – in which poverty, disease and crime were endemic – they did produce a simple but socially robust form of urbanism consisting of networks of streets and spaces enclosed by urban blocks that clearly defined the public realm.

The manner in which this form of urbanism conditioned social behaviour was not really understood or appreciated until it was all but lost during the twentieth century, as traditional approaches were gradually abandoned in favour of the formal experiments conducted by modern architects and city planners. This unfortunate circumstance led to two equally unsustainable outcomes. Those that had no option but to stay in the inner city became progressively alienated from their everyday environment and, as a consequence, from one another. This collapse in social fabric, essentially an environmentally-induced unravelling of society, was largely responsible for the social unrest, which exploded in Britain in the 1980's in the Brixton, and Toxteth riots.

Those who could afford to escape this implosion joined the urban flight of the 1950's-80's, which accelerated suburban sprawl.

This was not only environmentally unsustainable but also destroyed social cohesion, as cities became more spread out, proximity diminished, and communities became weaker.

## **The Environmental Imperative**

Over the last decade we have witnessed a renewed interest in inner city living and the beginnings of an urban renaissance. This can, in part, be attributed to the emergence of a new Post-Industrial economy based on financial services, creativity and tourism. With manufacturing facilities relocating overseas to take advantage of cheaper labour markets there has been a gradual improvement in the urban environment due to reductions in noise and pollution. This has made for increased liveability at the same time as the large tracts of brownfield land that manufacturing industries used to occupy - often close to city centres - have been released for mixed-use development. But whereas previous reconfigurations of the city have taken place around just these kinds of socio-economic shifts in society, at this point in time a new environmental imperative has also emerged that should place a completely new emphasis on the shape and form of urban development.

At John Thompson & Partners we have experienced many of these changes at first hand and are currently working on several large projects with the potential to deliver a new form of urbanism. This entails thinking about cities as balanced eco-systems that function effectively both internally in their relationship between physical form and the conditioning of social behaviour, and also externally in their relationship with the natural environment. Within this methodology we are pursuing four inter-related themes, the first of which concerns placemaking.

By placemaking we mean the fashioning of the built environment into a legible network of streets and spaces using traditional urban blocks to form a series of distinctive neighbourhoods. Our approach is part of a wider movement that recognises the value of traditional urban forms and accepts that the essential purpose of cities is to support social interaction. This relates directly to our second theme, which is the creation of social capital. In our experience, good placemaking creates a strong sense of identity, which in turn engenders a sense of pride and ownership in local communities. This invariably leads to good citizenship, neighbourliness and enhanced social capital.

This can be further cultivated by creating not-for-profit organisations such as Development Trusts, Business Forums, and Residents Associations, all of which encourage individuals to play a more active role in the development of their local community. Our third theme involves eco-architecture, which we are currently developing in collaboration with one of Germany's finest exponents of sustainable building, Joachim Eble. What we are searching for in this marriage of ideologies is a zone of best fit between an energy efficient architecture that utilises passive and active technologies for environmental ends, and urban forms that create a socially sustainable public realm. Demonstration projects are highly valuable from a research point of view, but in our experience are not capable of delivering legible and responsive urban neighbourhoods.

Approaching building design in this way lessens the impact of development on the environment and relates to our final theme, the better integration of environmental capital within the built form. This involves the creation of urban landscapes that are informed by, and integrated with the eco-systems that exist in nature - and can be achieved through the inclusion of sustainable urban drainage systems, biodiversity initiatives and the integration of wildlife habitats. This ensures that in creating our own environments we respect the flora and fauna we share our planet with.

If none of this sound revolutionary, that's because it isn't. Somewhere, someone is addressing each and every one of these initiatives. What isn't happening is the delivery of all of these ideas, simultaneously and all in the same place. As a result efforts to create a more sustainable built environment are rarely more than the sum of the parts. But if they are pursued holistically, placemaking, eco-architecture, social and environmental capital have the capacity to emulate what nature does best - bringing the environment into balance - by creating a new form of sustainable urbanism that integrates human inhabitation into natural eco-systems.

For us this is the new urbanism. We are close to identifying its DNA - now is the time to deliver.

**London Studio**

23-25 Great Sutton Street

London EC1V 0DN

T +44 (0)20 7017 1780

F +44 (0)20 7017 1781

E [info@jtp.co.uk](mailto:info@jtp.co.uk)

I [www.jtp.co.uk](http://www.jtp.co.uk)

**Edinburgh Studio**

Venue Studios

15-21 Calton Road

Edinburgh EH8 8DL

T +44 (0)131 550 6600

F +44 (0)131 558 8559

E [info@jtp.co.uk](mailto:info@jtp.co.uk)

I [www.jtp.co.uk](http://www.jtp.co.uk)