Sustainable urban place-shaping

Prof Matthew Carmona

The Bartlett School of Planning, UCL

m.carmona@ucl.ac.uk

What is a sustainable urban place?

Urban areas, where for example 90% of the UK's population lives, represent complex interconnected systems in which any intervention, no matter how small, impacts on the sustainability of the whole: environmentally, economically and socially. Our impact globally depends on our choices locally, and how we shape the places in which we live, work and play will make a significant contribution to this. Recently we have been facing two global crises, one environmental the other economic, and it is tempting to focus on technological fixes to address the former crisis, whilst the associated business opportunities will help to address the latter. But, as others have argued, sustainable approaches to the city should avoid the misconception that dealing with the environment is merely 'an engineering problem' to be overcome by technology. Instead, key 'precepts' for shaping places sustainably will need to combine a technological emphasis on form and impact with an equal focus on people and place. There are many ways that we can cut the resulting conceptual cake, and Niko Larco's matrix provides a valuable one. My own work has proposed nine precepts that include: resource efficiency, diversity and choice, quality of life, pollution reduction, concentration, distinctiveness, biotic support, and self-sufficiency (see Carmona 2009). To compliment Larco's carefully constructed paper, here I draw on my own work to more speculatively draw out key lessons for policymakers faced with the challenges these concepts present.

Rather than the utopian visions of Modernists or dystopian visions made in Hollywood, in 20, 50 or 100 years time people are likely to seek remarkably similar things from their urban areas as they do now. Whilst buildings may come and go, the structure of our cities that we live with today will still be with us long into the future and already provides us with some of the most robust and universal models for sustainable urbanism. The challenge is to work with what we have in order to deliver greater local sustainability. For policymakers, the first set of challenges involves recognising that they have a role, through:

- ❖ Accepting that policy decisions made at national and local levels can help individuals to lead more sustainable lifestyles (or not), ensuring that sustainable choices are possible, even preferable, through the manner in which places are planned, designed, invested in and managed.
- ❖ Avoiding technologically deterministic views of the city that prioritise technological fixes to the challenges of sustainable development over more fundamental people and place based strategies that attempt to reduce rather than simply mitigate the impacts of lifestyle choices.
- ❖ Ensuring that suitable precepts of sustainable urban place infuse through policy, no longer as a specialist and isolated branch of urban policy, but instead as an underpinning set of principles that shape all other policy realms: planning, transport and infrastructure, economic development, urban management, health policy, and so on.

- ❖ Consider the impact on local place of all policy decisions, and whether choices are helping to bind places and their communities together or fragment them and drive them apart.

What is sustainable urban place-shaping?

Clearly any conceptualisation of sustainable place is of little value unless it can be implemented. Any agreed principles can only ever represent the start of a process of shaping place in which aspirations need to be reconciled on the basis of local contextual factors; across scales as Larco suggests (my own research suggested buildings, streets and spaces, quarters and settlements – Carmona 2009: 60); and against a clear future-oriented vision of place. There is also a need for 'joined-up' approaches to governance in this area where responsibility is spread so thinly across diverse public and private stakeholders. This requires a long-term view of the costs and benefits of change and of investing in 'quality', and an impetus for change that, whilst existing at the building and settlement-wide scales (in controls over construction controls and through spatial plans), is not nearly so convincingly addressed at the intermediate scales of the public space and neighbourhood where governance processes have historically been weak.

In this, agencies with plan and grant making powers have a critical co-ordinating role to deliver a partnership of public and private interests, without which sustainable local place-making will be all but impossible. It is important therefore to extend the notion of place-shaping, moving it on from circular debates about governance models, to capture the notion of positive change that will impact on real lives and real places across social classes and contexts. Such local place-shaping, as I have previously argued in this journal, represents an on-going journey through time in which places are continuously shaped and re-shaped – physically, socially and economically – through periodic planned intervention, day-to-day use, and the long-term guardianship of place (Carmona 2014). We need to understand the complex processes of design, development, use and management and how each effects the sustainability of the whole, but also the in-built inertia in the system created by the complexity of stakeholder roles, the dissipation of power and responsibilities, and that places and processes become more and more complex, and change more and more challenging, over time.

In the future, change might be driven through 'top-down command' or 'bottom-up collaboration', but whilst national / state policy and resources can be powerful drivers of local practice, they are also blunt instruments with which to effect change in local contexts and processes that are as varied and multi-dimensional as the concept of sustainability itself. Local place-shaping will ultimately require the building of a coalition of interests across scales and time in order to gradually steer change. This is likely to require real change in key levers of power and local resources, with, in the future, varied coalitions of local actors entrusted and empowered to intervene as appropriate in each stage of the place-shaping continuum. For policymakers, the challenge is to:

- ❖ Recognise and continue to emphasise and support the diverse ways in which place quality can add value economically, for human health, socially, and environmentally across spatial scales.
- ❖ Accept that there is no single morally and practically superior model of urban governance. In both theory and practice, approaches centred on state action, or on private sector effort, or in direct community participation, can all provide solutions to particular challenges in the right contexts.

❖ Recognise that real changes to the places that matter to people are far more likely to drive local interest and bottom-up enthusiasm, across the social strata, than the tweeks to local governance and policy arrangements that can sometimes seem to be a substitute for action.

❖ Understand that place-shaping represents an on-going journey through which places are continuously shaped and re-shaped – physically, socially and economically – through periodic planned intervention, day-to-day use and the long-term guardianship of place.

A sustainable place-shaping challenge

In fact processes of local place-shaping and the power relationships they define have remained remarkably consistent (in developed countries) over most of the last 100 years and are all too likely to remain so over the next 100. Sustainability has not been their raison d'être, the result being that large parts of our cities have been subject to a gradual but relentless move towards 'fragmentation'. My own research reveals that a case-in-point are our mixed street corridors (local high streets or main streets) that provide exemplars of the challenges of urban sustainability and also of some of the opportunities.

'Mix' is a characteristic of urbanity and therefore of historic cities across the world – mixing uses, activities, social groups, and built forms in a fine-grained melange of urban interactions. Mix sits at the heart of the 'Diversity and choice' precept already mentioned and features heavily in Larco's review of sustainable concepts, issues and elements. In the UK, despite the redirection of public investment (at least until relatively recently) into urban areas, the mixed corridors that both connect the parts of our cities and which historically have been the focus of local public services, have increasing come under strain. They are taken for granted and neglected, leading all too often to a spiral of decline; overrun by traffic, run down with derelict property and empty sites, and populated by ubiquitous signage, fast food establishments, betting shops and by formulaic or marginal retail. No one takes a view of the whole 'place'.

Yet, despite this, local mixed streets in the UK continue to command considerable local support from surrounding communities, encouraging sustainable and inclusive patterns of living in the process. As complex pieces of physical, social and economic fabric, and as large-scale sunk investments in urban infrastructure, mixed corridors continue to play a vital strategic and local role. For example, London's 500Km of mixed streets outside the Central Activities Zone, represent just 3.6% of the road network but support employment for 1.5 million Londoners (in retail, office and light industrial uses), host a sustainable public transport network, accommodate half of London's brownfield sites, and serve (within a five minute walk) a population of 5 million (Carmona 2015). Despite this and the continuing availability, indeed increase in availability, of capacity for development within urban areas, the public sector has continued to place such spaces in the 'too difficult to handle category'. Rather than a dead-end future for these sorts of inherently sustainable spaces, a 'sustainable future' would require that they become a strategic priority for public sector policy, investment and action over a generation, in the process benefitting both their existing communities of users, and the new ones 50 or 100 years in the future. For policymakers, the challenge is to:

❖ In a holistic manner, proactively explore the huge unrealised potential of the existing urban structure, such as what to do with its mixed street corridors, many of which retain unrivalled public support and

- great potential to accommodate (and generate) future growth, new jobs, and housing in a sustainable manner.

❖ Similar potential is likely to exist in the degraded zones around city centres, along our unloved urban inner ring roads, at key public transport interchanges, along ex-industrial urban water and rail fronts, and in many of our pre and post-war suburbs.

❖ This will require a very different, more intelligent, approach to how we understand and plan for such complex urban areas and spaces, both to stimulate their growth potential over the long-term whilst having regard to their day to day stewardship needs.

❖ It will require intervention that sees such places not as a set of fragmented responsibilities, but instead in a holistic manner reflecting the needs, conflicts and synergies within and between the four interrelated dimensions of complex urban elements; between their: evolving physical fabric, role in social and economic exchange, function as facilitators of movement, and as locations of real estate use and investment.

Conclusion

The challenges and choices available to us are of course more nuanced, complex and less stark than I have set out, but broadly we have the choice to work with or against 'place', to embrace it or ignore it. This implies much more than simply regulating to reduce energy use and carbon emissions. Instead it implies a much more profound basis upon which to make decisions which impact on the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the built environment. It also, for the foreseeable future, requires us to work with tried-and-tested urban typologies such as the mixed street corridor that have proven their versatility and sustainability through time.

Two key propositions thread through the paper:

o First, that local political and professional stakeholders whose remit impacts on the local built environment, alongside the populations they serve, have perhaps the most critical role to play in influencing patterns of life and development and whether, or not, they are sustainable. They need the confidence, resources and knowledge to make this happen.

o Second, in economically and urbanistically mature countries, such as the UK, this should begin with understanding, nurturing and exploiting the opportunities presented by the existing built environment, and worrying a little less about creating new places from scratch.

By recognising and releasing opportunities within the already established built environment, policy makers potentially tap into a series of win:win benefits: stimulating economic growth and environmental enhancement exactly where it will benefit the greatest number, and, at the same time, meeting obligations to develop in a more sustainable manner whilst also better addressing local needs, for example for new housing.

In this regard the case is made that the 'good places' of the future will feel much the same in a hundred years time as they do today and as they felt in the past: places in tune with people, and people in tune with places, and both in tune with the larger environment with which they commune. Ultimately this implies a sort of equilibrium, in which places meet the economic, social and environmental needs of their populations, and in turn are valued and

nurtured by those local populations. As the example of mixed corridors demonstrates, whilst sometimes this relationship has got out of kilter, the potential exists through positive place-shaping processes to reinvigorate these vital pieces of urban infrastructure and reinvent them as the essential, and sustainable, local places of the future.

References

Carmona M (2009) "Sustainable Urban Design: Definitions and Delivery" International Journal for Sustainable Development, 12(1): 48-77

Carmona M (2014) "The Place-shaping Continuum: A Theory of Urban Design Process" Journal of Urban Design, 19(1): 2-36

Carmona M (2015) London's Local High Streets: the problems, potential and complexities of mixed street corridors, Progress in Planning, 100: 1-84