

URBAN PANEL

REVIEW PAPER

HARLOW

“...the key to living in the industrial age.” New Towns Exhibition brochure.

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1.0 The Urban Panel visited Harlow as part of its programme of visits looking at those New Towns which are earmarked to play a part in the Government's Sustainable Communities programme of growth in the SE. As such, the visit was not one which the local authority or other stakeholders had sought, but it was one which was responded to generously and with enthusiasm. Over the course of twenty four hours of visits, presentations and discussion, the Panel came to the conclusion that that degree of engagement was entirely appropriate and probably derived from the exquisite mixture of opportunity and challenge facing Harlow.

1.1 The Panel could not fail to be impressed by the degree to which the original concept of the Gibberd plan was still visible, the extent to which it dominated the continuing character of the place and the way in which its qualities polarise opinion. On the visit to the Stow, the qualities of the original concept, the surviving spaces and buildings were pointed out by

Civic Society colleagues (whose presence and input gave much to the visit) at the same time as residents nursing a drink outside the café told us the place was a dump with nothing to do. In discussion about future initiatives, Panel members were torn between the belief that the green wedges had created a brilliantly recognisable and humane form of town and agreement with Gordon Cullen (Townscape 1966) that the very concept of Harlow constituted a design against “towniness”.

1.2 What is clear to all is that the town has, at present, a number of serious needs which must be addressed in the context of the Government’s decision that Harlow be enlarged. Some of them derive from the fact that New Towns undergo surprisingly little organic change – built in one era, fabric comes up for renewal or renovation in a wave. Furthermore, the problem is exacerbated by the Council having inherited a preponderance of public sector housing from the Development Corporation, without the once intended financial dowry. Others derive from the fact that the industrial age has come, gone and not yet been successfully replaced. Still others from the fact that the infrastructure of one age cannot support the requirements of another and finally in Harlow’s specific case, the infrastructure and design were severely damaged by the location of the M11 on the “wrong” side of the town.

2.0 Although this paper will go on to reflect on the many specific issues which arose, it may be helpful to begin with the Panel’s conclusion that Harlow presents an extremely clear challenge to the prevailing growth model.

Pleas for hugely improved infrastructure, such as those heard in Harlow, are common across the Growth Areas and, for that reason alone, very few will be answered in the affirmative. Most applicants are, *de facto*, told to increase the quantum of development opportunity to the point that the infrastructure requirement will become overwhelming and the development logic of its creation so clear that the market will provide. The Panel did not find this model any more convincing in Harlow than in other similar locations. Indeed, grateful for sight of this worked example, the Panel believed strongly that a conclusion applicable to all the New Towns is that, **following a health check, the defects of those town centres must be corrected first, before development outside the centre is encouraged**. Should the reader believe that this conclusion is based on an unreasonably gloomy prognosis with an unfeasibly expensive cure, Panel members urged consideration of Swindon (the subject of a Panel visit in 2004). Here a town had gone for growth with success and vigour; but the market offered and Swindon approved out of town housing, industry and offices in a widely scattered, car-dominated layout and the historically interesting core and the 60s retail provision were left to one side. The result is a deficient centre, so difficult to correct that the Government has acknowledged the case for and supported the establishment of a URC – for the centre of one of the 1990s fastest growing UK towns!

2.1 In Harlow, many expressed concern about aspects of the development model available, although none wanted to drive away necessary

investment. The extent of the quandary facing the town was highlighted by Ropemaker Properties proposal for a massive extension of the town to the north of the Stort Valley. A knee jerk reaction is to dismiss this scheme as merely adventitious with no satisfactory or convincing links to the existing town and with considerable potential for creating an alternative settlement. And yet the promoters are saying, in part, that without development of a quality which transforms the image of Harlow by providing accommodation which differs from the existing norm, the town cannot change. The Ropemaker team did not have to be pressed very hard before admitting that their proposition was that the qualities of the new development should be reflected in other development activity within the existing New Town until both achieved an entirely new, higher level. The transformed town on both sides of the valley would then have the potential to attract further new high grade incoming development. Whether this proposition is accepted or not it is, at least, another radical questioning of the current development model. Whether the argument is that town centre revitalisation must precede residential and retail development to ensure success or whether it is that the only successful development can be one which challenges the current physical extent and the underlying design principles of Harlow, both sides are united in vigorously questioning the current retail / residential led development model. Agreement that growth areas are not about housing growth but about community growth emphasises the need for investment across all parts of the expanding settlement.

3.0 The visit began with extensive and extremely helpful briefings on history, character, regeneration needs and supporting studies. To the author and contributors of all these pieces, the Panel was most grateful. This was immediately followed by the first site visit – to the Town Centre. The Panel noted that the original concept of the town centre had been radically modified by the removal of the nine storied Civic Centre. Whatever the structural / functional case for its replacement, the Panel was clear that the new building had done less than credit to the site. Its positioning overlooking a massive car park and thus reducing the (relocated) water garden to a weak element was regrettable, as was the lack of proper integration into the existing fabric – as exemplified by the blank elevation towards the church. Nor could the retail development which had been enabled by the Civic Centre redevelopment be highly praised. Standard C21 retail environments can offer no more to the character of Harlow than to the older centres they often disfigure. The spaces between the Civic Centre and the surviving elements of the early centre are at best bland and anonymous. The Council was at pains to stress that the new retail had made a first critical step in changing external public perceptions of Harlow and started to both reclaim some of the lost retail expenditure and to convince the market that further investment in the centre was an attractive proposition. The Panel acknowledged this point but considered that retail development which made Harlow look like nowhere in particular risked undermining the specific qualities of the existing centre.

3.1 Moving into the High Street and Market Place, spaces which had been highly praised by critics in the 1960s, the Panel was impressed by the extent of survival of the original plan and of its spatial qualities. Members noted and regretted a decline in the quality management of the public realm – the more regrettable in a town with such a good and ubiquitous public art policy – but also noted that relatively cheap but striking improvements, such as the removal of accretive clutter, were readily within the local authority's grasp. The Market Place and the adjoining square were singled out for particular praise. Even the minority, who could not find much to praise in the architecture as it appears now, were impressed by the images of it as built and all agreed that the spaces are carefully proportioned, well related the one to the other and entirely capable of careful repair for a viable future. In the age of localism and Farmers' Markets, the potential for a thriving specialist market to provide a quality shopping experience in direct and potentially successful opposition to the airfield car boot sales was commended to the authority. What the Panel could not endorse at all was the proposal that more of the (*secondary*) square be lost to another, infilling, major retail development. The Panel urged the council to renegotiate with potential developers and to find a scheme which understood the significance and qualities of the centre, built on that and enhanced Harlow, rather than making it more like everywhere else.

3.2 While being shown around the centre, the Panel were shown an early model of the site and were grateful for the light this cast on the surviving

fabric. At the same time they were (readily) distracted by the imaginative use of the new civic centre for exercises in understanding urban form and development produced by the local schools. Alongside the active engagement of the Civic Society, the Panel found the interest of the community and the authority's willingness to encourage that process extremely encouraging. The Panel felt strongly that these principles of extensive and inclusive consultation should inform every step in the expansion and regeneration of the town – and that consultation should avoid general, open questions about what people want, but rather ask people to address carefully considered and developed options.

3.3 The Panel's journey to and from the centre was a chance to experience the impact made by the very special townscape of neighbourhoods created within existing countryside. All Panel members were impressed by the strong impression of real countryside which is still given, even though much is now corralled into the green wedges. Knowing that there are voices arguing for the (at least partial) development of these wedges, the Panel carefully considered their qualities and remained uncertain. On the one hand the concept of small neighbourhoods in open countryside with the potential for a pleasant walk through fields to the centre has been strikingly achieved. On the other, that very achievement may be considered to be no more urban than a widespread rural parish with a number of hamlets scattered within its many acres. In that view, the centre is seen as dysfunctional because insufficiently connected to the neighbourhoods.

4.0 Despite downpours, the Panel very much enjoyed exploring some of the neighbourhoods. The Stow is an impressively complete survival from the neighbourhood planning era and as such an excellent subject for study. The physical achievement of convincing central spaces, carefully disposed shops churches and community facilities, all in modest but convincing architecture, was impressive. What was also clear was that even this neighbourhood centre, by all accounts one of those in better condition, had serious shortcomings to address. It was a great help to see this and other centres before hearing Paul Murrain of Ropemaker (and / but formerly of the Prince's Trust) question the whole principle of neighbourhood centres intentionally positioned away from the points of greatest connectivity.

4.1 In Mark Hall South and Mark Hall North, the Panel was reminded of the remarkable achievement of Gibberd and the New Town Corporation in attracting so many quality architects to work in burgeoning Harlow. Many of the buildings and spaces created remain exemplars of their type and a credit to commissioners and designers. They are, however also clearly in need of significant investment, both to bring them up to C21 housing standards and to repair fabric in which there is a history of under-investment. The Panel acknowledged that the repair and re-investment programmes for these areas would need to be carefully thought through. The case for total retention for architectural and historic reasons is no more convincing than that for extensive demolition. Finding the balance between these two extremes, particularly in the context of a regressive

government regime which penalises repair will be difficult. Relating that to a wider reconsideration of the structure of Gibberd's town will require designers of as great ability and commitment as those who originally conceived and built the neighbourhoods.

4.2 In that context the Panel felt it worth making the case for characterisation of the New Town. As Elain Harwood of EH, Alistair Howe of the Civic Society and many other contributors to the visit made clear, there is a general level of understanding of the overarching concept. Under that there is a deep well of detailed historical knowledge of the process of development, of the procurement of different practices and of the relative merit of their achievement – some of the latter being further underpinned by local and national designations. That does not, however, quite constitute characterisation. A good characterisation study would draw all that information together, explicitly state the significance of all the different elements **and** define areas in which change was desirable or at least permissible. Such a document, preferably validated by consultation, could provide a framework within which developers, the council and stakeholders could formulate detailed views about specific proposals.

5.0 Visiting the land on which Harlow North is proposed was a further reminder of the degree to which the closeness of open countryside is entirely characteristic of Harlow. Whatever else it might achieve, development to the north of the River Stort will transform Harlow. The city centre on the ridge is seen across open fields and from a place among

open fields. The approach from the north is very rural and twenty thousand houses would utterly take that away.

5.1 The Panel were however, torn on the significance of this land and the converse case for its development. On the one hand it seems obtuse to propose development outside the town, on Green Belt land while the Gibberd plan leaves similar developable land throughout the town – land which some described as being frightening, unsupervised and, therefore, relatively underused. On the other hand, if the existing design is to survive recognisably, then building on the green wedges, or excessive densification of the neighbourhood centres must not happen. On balance, the Panel accepted that densification might occasionally be acceptable but only in areas of opportunity identified by the characterisation process.

5.2 The extension, reinforcement and onward development of Old Harlow presents a similar set of questions. Where the “conservation architecture” of the 1960s succeeds is in its reinforcement of the traditional High Street. If the bungalows at the end of this street are now beyond repair it would be better to replace them with two-storey buildings that continue this work rather than to create a new garden here. Current proposals risk undue densification of the town’s large gardens and back lands and the extension of the town in a non-descript fashion which would threaten its clear identity. The qualities of the existing old town need to be well understood and valued as the foundation for successful change.

6.0 The proposal for North Harlow was, of course, not only a challenge to the Green Belt, to countryside policies generally and, as discussed above, to prevailing growth models. It was also the matter which had come to dominate discussion of Harlow at the Inquiry into the East of England Regional Spatial Strategy. The Panel was extremely grateful for the exposition on these matters from Michael Bingham of the GO-East. The Panel did not, however, find the decision of the Inquiry Panel entirely convincing. The argument that Harlow should expand by a smaller number of houses and that the difficult decisions about location were all for the local authority to make seemed to duck the issue while dealing a blow to the Harlow North proposal. The Panel acknowledged that very difficult matters such as water cycle management and transport infrastructure had to be resolved. Members felt that the cost of infrastructure provision alone was not sufficient justification for Harlow North, but noted that, if weight were given to Ropemaker's broader proposition about the viability of the town, transport and other infrastructure might be afforded.

6.1 The Panel felt that, taken together, the Harlow North proposal, the decision of the E I Panel, the development difficulties compounded by local government boundaries and the very real hardships and deprivation, the standard retail development proposals and the impossibility of funding infrastructure work without the value of housing development, all combined to present the Council with a very high grade dilemma. However, since housing land might now be identified east and west of the town rather than

north and south and the centre was at last attracting development pressure, the case was made for a radical re-appraisal, based on characterisation of the whole town. Combined with a health check of the town centre, this should provide the blue print for work which would, in the first instance revitalise the centre and then increase its connectivity to renewed existing neighbourhoods and appropriately located new ones.

6.2 Whether any of this development could be located on land currently within green wedges was, the Panel thought, not so much a matter of principle as one of fact and degree. Characterisation would point out those estates which most justified significant change to the built fabric. In some such cases, the case for re-modelling neighbourhoods in a denser configuration might be allied with judicious development within (the edges of) green wedges. In others, neighbourhoods of houses capable of careful modernisation within a slightly modified shell might well continue to benefit from careful disposition within green wedges as at present. The essential point is that densification is not the simple acceptable solution. It may be accepted, but only in some cases and always following careful analysis.

7 The Panel felt strongly that the unique artistic inheritance which the Gibberds and others had left to Harlow should not be underplayed. Not only is the continued display of sculpture a defining characteristic of Harlow. The existence of the artist community at Parndon Mill and the fact that there is accommodation available at rents which can no longer be found almost anywhere in London may point the way to reinforcing the

image of Harlow as a place for artists to congregate and to play a continuing role in the image change which the town needs.

- 8 The Panel had the privilege of visiting one development which is making great, successful efforts to change the image of the town. New Hall is a credit to the developers who, by placing faith in a talented urban designer, adopting his framework and taking far greater pains than the opposition to achieve a genuinely sustainable neighbourhood, have lit a beacon in the dull under-achievement of the standard residential offer of Harlow and elsewhere. It is just such developments which offer the prospect of retaining the economically successful who currently choose to live outside the town. The Panel members could not fail to admire the commitment which the Meon brothers brought to this process and to wish them every success. It is entirely proper that the achievement at New Hall is becoming known around the sector. Not only Harlow, but the whole Sustainable Communities movement should consider the lessons of New Hall.
- 9 The Panel were indebted to Ropemaker and all those involved in the North Harlow (NH) team who came and presented their scheme despite the unpropitious timing of the E I Panel's report on the Regional Spatial Strategy. Despite the uncertain planning context which the report created, the panel felt that the proposition was worthy of discussion because of the questions of principle it raised and the interesting light thus cast on the future development of Harlow generally. The Panel's views, therefore, do

not relate to the details – precise size – layout – development programme – although all of these sparked discussion, but rather to the wider implications of Harlow North.

9.1 The Panel entirely understood the fears of those who argued that HN would fail to complement Harlow by simultaneously compromising the rural setting of the new town and providing a poorly connected competitor. However, members also acknowledged that the HN team attempted to address each of these fears while emphasising that their proposition was, by their lights, the only way that Harlow could transform itself. It was with great interest and some admiration that the Panel noted the interest of Ropemaker in seeking reconfigured redevelopment of the Gateway site in order to enable better connections from the centre to the north. The Panel acknowledged that there are a great many questions of connectivity in Harlow which must be addressed and that the HN proposal emphasises the need for a connectivity project across the whole settlement. (Members had mainly arrived at the station and been confronted by one of the worst examples of recent thoughtless development that it had encountered anywhere. The wilful way in which the new housing by the station exists solely for its own purposes, blocking access to the town, providing an image of low rent, low aspiration architecture has to be seen to be believed. Harlow will have to treat that development as an awful reminder of how little the unmediated market has to offer and undertake never to fall for such inadequacy again if its current redevelopment is to succeed).

9.2 The theories of connectivity which underpin HN contain, it was made clear, a direct challenge to the principles on which Gibberd's neighbourhoods are based. Acknowledging the force of much of Space Syntax's work, the Panel were nevertheless cautious about wholesale acceptance of a theory which, as presented, doomed the internal neighbourhood centres of Gibberd's plan to failure, while presenting a solution which may readily be built into new development, but only retro-fitted to the existing town with great difficulty. Nonetheless, the challenge is a real and thoughtful one and the Panel urged the Council not to reject the thinking just because it was associated with a challenging scheme which it could not yet embrace.

9.3 A further challenge of merit was the view that not only was HN needed, but that it should be accompanied by a major upgrading of the quality of all new development in the town. As indicated above, the Panel embraced this view entirely. There are new jobs being created in Harlow, the Panel was told, but people commute in to fill the posts because of the lack of high quality housing. That cannot continue lest the town is to be doomed to be a low cost, low aspiration dormitory for Stansted and similar employers. This is the reason that the Panel argues that the Harlow centre must be improved first, in order to create the image of the kind of place where relatively high income earners will want to live and as a result more developers will be willing to emulate New Hall. At the same time, there must be more radical questioning than the Panel heard of the level of provision of affordable housing. If high earners commute to Harlow rather than live there then the need is for a better range of housing across the

spectrum. If developers are willing to provide the much needed upper end housing, there may be less merit in squeezing them for affordable housing when greater contributions to necessary infrastructure might be achieved at the same time as the housing provision is broadened.

10 The Panel thus found much to reflect on arising from both the Harlow North challenge and the complex circumstances facing the Council. It felt that one of the most striking aspects of Harlow as it is now is that it reflects the strength of the original vision and the degree to which commitment to its principles was maintained for so long. The Panel felt that the need for a similar vision was now just as important. If the redevelopment of Harlow is to be utilitarian, with new development attracted as and when possible, with pragmatism as the defining characteristic, there is a clear danger that Harlow will not only fail to escape from its current predicament, but also it will lose those excellent characteristics which its New Town movement genesis gave it. There must, therefore, be an agreed vision for the future which keeps the best of the existing fabric and the most durable of the design principles on which Harlow is based, while adopting a new set of aspirations for a successfully expanded town of which this generation as well as Gibberd's should be proud. The Panel remains convinced that this can be achieved and that the understanding of the qualities of the existing, early investment in repair and improvement of existing fabric, particularly in the centre, followed by the attraction of new employment opportunities and a broad spectrum of housing provision can be the keys for success.

Summary

The Urban Panel:

- a) admired the way in which so much of the principles and aspirations of the original Gibberd plan had been achieved and had survived;**
- b) acknowledged that, notwithstanding that achievement and the amount of high quality design therein, Harlow currently has very many major challenges to confront;**
- c) agreed that the decision to embrace a major role in the growth areas programme was right;**
- d) urged all parties to acknowledge that Harlow New Town had once embodied a quest for quality and that that quest must continue to be Harlow's unique selling point;**
- e) welcomed the degree to which there was agreement between Civic Society, Council and (a few) developers that the route ahead depended on a change of image based on the quality not only of the past but also of the future;**
- f) urged the Council to question vigorously several of the underlying principles of the growth model currently in vogue and,**

critically, the belief that a rush for standard retail and residential growth can deliver either the quality of development or the necessary infrastructure;

- g) further urged the Council to seek mechanisms for improving the centre, by seeking a far better scheme for the north centre than that currently on offer;**
- h) pressed the Council to resolve the most critical existing housing problems before turning all attention to new residential development;**
- i) considered a characterisation exercise to be an essential stepping stone to understanding the quality, significance and adaptability of the existing town and an absolute requirement before any programmes of densification are considered;**
- j) thought the quality of the development at New Hall to set the residential development community an admirable challenge across the Sustainable Communities movement as well as to offer Harlow Council a benchmark which should be set for all potential developers;**
- k) thanked the Harlow North team for raising a number of extremely challenging questions for Harlow and reinforcing the need to**

transform the image of the town, whatever quantum and location of development was eventually decided upon;

l) questioned the need for a conventional affordable housing policy in Harlow, arguing that the town rather needed a broad spectrum of housing provision for all income levels in order to attract high income residents and to retain the successful; and

m) believed that the several, durable successes of the Gibberd era depended on the quality of the vision and the strength of the commitment to it, a process which must now be repeated with the adoption of a new vision as much owned by existing residents and politicians as attractive to developers and potential new residents.