

Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution Study on Urban Environments, Well-being and Health

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This work represents a review of the literature available on the aforementioned topics, and should in no way be seen as a new research or a new contribution to the field it discusses. All material is derived from existing research in the field.

RCEP Urban Environments Desk Study
“The Benefits of Urban Living”

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Abstract

Recommended Reading

UTF
DETR 2000
Schoon, 2001
CPRE

Acronyms

CABE	Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment
CPRE	Campaign to Protect Rural England
LA	Local Authority
PPG3	Planning Policy Guidance 3
RIBA	Royal Institute of British Architects
UDC	Urban Development Corporation
UTF	Urban Task Force

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1. Introduction

The “urban environment” (see box 1) has long been regarded as a problem in the UK, and viewed as a particularly unfavourable place to live. The list of problems that urban areas often face is extensive: crime, pollution, congestion, poor schools and healthcare, lack of green space, alienation etc. Indeed, many inner-city areas have been persistently grim living environments since the Industrial Revolution, conditions which fuelled a “flight to the suburbs” and to the countryside itself.

However, for those living or marketing the recent phenomenon of “urban living”, this conception of urban areas is a past history, and the future is much more positive. Indeed, (parts of) Britain’s towns and cities have improved considerably over the past decade or so, providing much more positive living environments. It is claimed that cities are “back in fashion” (Coyle, 2004), and various city centres have seen an inflow of residents in the past decade alongside large scale physical regeneration schemes in these areas. Manchester’s city centre population, for example, has risen from a few hundred to nearly 10,000 in this time (Coyle, 2004).

Despite this progress, various commentators (e.g. Schoon, 2001) argue that cities are still generally negatively perceived in British culture as living environments. While there is currently an enormous amount of positive rhetoric about urban living, under the banner of an “urban renaissance”, it can be difficult to identify the actual material benefits from the hype that surrounds them. This paper therefore aims to collate relevant literature and clearly set out the advantages that living in urban areas presents. I focus on urban areas in the UK, particularly in England, but occasionally draw examples from elsewhere in the developed world.

Urban living is currently popular with housing policy makers and various environmental groups, and I first outline the strategic benefits of concentrating populations in towns and cities. But, as John Prescott famously remarked, cities need to be places that people *want* to live in not leave (my emphasis). As will be seen, various groups are now choosing to live in urban areas, and I examine the factors that might make urban living attractive. This said, I will also look critically at recent praise of urban living, arguing that the foundations of these visionary arguments need to be investigated with more concrete research. Experiences of city living are additionally far from universal. Urban environments display distinct social geographies, and I will discuss how the costs and benefits of urban living balance out for different groups, concluding with some cautions for those seeking to indiscriminately extol city living.

Box 1: Defining urban areas

In the UK and other developed world economies, distinctions between rural suburban and urban, are increasingly blurred, and the different land genres difficult to define (see X reference). Literature on urban living and urban environments varies in its conception of “urban”, and confusingly often does not set out precisely what is being referred to. Writers may be referring to particular parts of towns and cities, or to the whole settlement. The Urban White Paper (DETR, 2000a), for example, refers to urban areas as both settlements with a population of over 10,000, and to denote the “urban core” of a town or city as opposed to urban/suburban or suburban zones.

However, most commentators fall into one of three categories in their use of the term “urban”: describing non-rural areas within the rural/urban; referring to the city centre, in the context of the phenomenon of city-centre living (e.g. Unsworth & Fox, 2003); or more broadly to describing a high density settlement pattern that contrasts with rural and suburban areas (e.g. CPRE, 2003). This latter understanding of an urban area is the one associated with the “urban renaissance”, and a particular vision of urban living in such places is set out in section 3.1. Whichever definition of urban is used, diversity in the physical fabric of different urban areas, and of experiences of living within them should be remembered.

Reflecting this flexible understanding, I also do not use a hard and fast definition of urban area. Instead I try to be clear about what different proponents and critics of urban living are referring to. When writing more generally about urban living, I am referring to the third concept, of high density areas in town and city-centres, and the inner-city that cannot be described as suburbia.

2. Background and context

Urban decay since the 1970s associated with de-industrialisation has accentuated a (chiefly English) historical cultural preference for the countryside, resulting in particularly negative perceptions of urban living during this period. However, the past 15 or so years has seen the emergence of a new wave of enthusiasm for towns and cities from various groups, whose arguments have coalesced around the storyline (Hajer, 1995) of “urban renaissance”.

2.1 Urban decline

Figure 1 – A London night scene, 1871

(Source: www.cyberium.co.uk/.../TownsandCities.html)

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Britain’s cities were the world leaders of the Industrial Revolution, and remained central in the economic development of the country (Coyle, 1998). However, as authors like Dickens and Gaskell remind us, life for the workers in the urban slums was miserable. Since then, urban living conditions for the masses gradually improved,

through both raising incomes, and the slum clearances and social reforms of the Victorians and subsequent government efforts during the early 20th century.

Nevertheless, since the 1970s, many towns and cities have experienced the deterioration of their social, economic and physical environments. This has been largely tied up with deindustrialisation and broad processes of economic restructuring. Glasgow, for example, lost 77,597 manufacturing jobs between 1971 and 1983 (Boyle & Hughes, 1991). Unable to easily adapt to the information-based industries that have replaced them (see section 3.4), large inner-city areas experienced very high unemployment, and a well documented cycle of social and environmental decline. This has often been compounded by poor neighbourhood design, particularly associated with high-rise buildings of the 1960s. Problems were and in many places continue to be exacerbated by the exodus of “people with choices” (Schoon, 2001) in a process of “counter-urbanisation” (Champion, 1989).

*Figure 2 – Photographs of urban decline from Schoon (2001)
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The metropolitan local authorities (LAs) of the New Urban Left, deeply unpopular with central government, were financially unable to meet these challenges, and were additionally often unwilling to engage with the New Economy. Thatcher’s Urban Development Corporations (UDCs), set up in 1980, tried to lure investment back to the city, but were heavily criticised for being far removed from local needs, undemocratic and above all largely unsuccessful. These problems associated with decline dominated social science research within urban areas during the 1970s and 80s, which was often undertaken by those seeking to show how capital was again disenfranchising the poor (e.g. Harvey, 1973). (*references?*)

2.2 “The Country and the City”¹

“Urban life [in Britain] is regarded as something that has to be suffered; the real McCoy is the countryside” (Hutton, 2000).

Negative perceptions of urban areas have been compounded by a historical cultural preference for the countryside. Despite the historical achievements of our cities, the countryside – the “green and pleasant land” – is a dominant national symbol for many². Unlike much of continental Europe, which views urban living favourably (“think Paris, think Florence” Green Futures, 2003), the majority of Britons aspire to the “rural idyll”, even though this is now largely mythological (*reference*). *Figures about preference for the countryside*. This anti-urban bias was founded on the horrific realities of the industrial city (Urban Task Force, 1999), although notable exceptions like Kensington & Chelsea in London exist; as Schoon (2001) remarks, the process of counter-urbanisation and suburbanisation triggered was important in raising the quality of life of the masses. But this preference for suburbia and the rural has become a part of British culture, contributing to the “urban exodus” of the 1970s, 80s and 90s (see Champion, 1989), despite the fact that the link between density and wretchedness was broken long ago (Schoon, 2001). Nonetheless, while conditions in many cities

¹ Title of Raymond Williams’ (1985) famous book which analyses persistent images of the country and city within English culture.

² This said, for certain groups, including people of colour, the countryside can be threatening, as it represents an aspect of British culture that they are excluded from; see Kinsman, 1995.

improve and numerous commentators call for a change in national attitudes towards cities, the inner-city problem estates and large swathes of abandoned housing in various northern cities should not be forgotten.

2.3 Urban Renaissance

By the end of the 1980s, however, a new enthusiasm for the city was beginning to emerge from various groups; this has included metropolitan local authorities, environmentalists, central government and what Tony Champion describes as the “new city lovers”. Their differing reasons for supporting urban environments have formed a “discourse coalition” (Hajer, 1995) around the storyline of “urban renaissance”.

1. Metropolitan Local Authorities

Aware of the problems of their constituencies, and spurred on by examples of successful urban regeneration from cities like Barcelona, various local authorities (LAs) began positive steps to turn around their city centres in the late 1980s and 90s. In a shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989, Hall & Hubbard, 1998), city councils partnered with private agencies in order to regenerate their urban fabric and change their image, so promoting their city as a destination for international capital and tourism (section 3.4). Some of the enormous changes to the physical fabric of Birmingham are outlined in section 4.4.

2. Environmentalists

The diversity of the environmental movement means that there is no consensus over an issue like appropriate settlement form. This said, while the utopia of some “deep greens” is a low technology, subsistence livelihood, many environmentalists now recognise a number of ecological benefits of higher density living. Most notable is the protection of the countryside that urban living can bring through curbing urban sprawl (see section 3.2).

3. Central Government

Traditionally with a more urban support base, since coming to power in 1997 the Labour Party has also been keen to help towns and cities regenerate and adjust to the opportunities and challenges of the New Economy. In 1998, eminent architect Lord Rogers was commissioned to lead an Urban Task Force to investigate the causes of urban decline, and to recommend solutions (results published in Urban Task Force, 1999). Alongside the problem of urban decline is the challenge of a reported housing shortage, particularly in the Southeast, and the Task Force proposed that both problems might be solved simultaneously by promoting an “Urban Renaissance”. This would involve regeneration in declining cities, predominately of the North, and densification of the cities of the overcrowded Southeast (section 3.3). Such a “win-win” solution was well received. The government’s response was published in an Urban White Paper in 2000, much of which became formal housing policy in the document Policy Planning Guidance 3, known as PPG3 (DETR, 2000b). Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott has also warmly embraced the philosophy of New Urbanism (see section 3.1), and has recently launched a “Sustainable Communities Plan” which absorbs many of these ideas. However, although a distinct positive shift away from the urban sprawl of earlier decades has been formalised, critics argue that Prescott’s plans are not radical enough.

4. “New City Lovers”

Finally, many of those who have chosen to move back to inner-city locations remind us that urban living can be a positive experience. They value various attributes of living in urban areas, in particular the “buzz” of the city.

Section 3 explores further the strategic benefits of urban living claimed by the first three of these groups. The more personal advantages experienced as city-dwellers by the final group are explored in section 4.

3. Urban living as a solution – Strategic benefits of urban concentration

The urban renaissance discourse is supported by a wide range of groups because it touts the concentration of people in well designed, high density urban environments as the solution to a number of key challenges. These will be detailed in the following section. It should be noted, however, that most advocates are arguing for a specific urban residential form, rather than promoting all forms of urban development; it is clear for example that no-one is arguing in favour of the problematic high-rise tower blocks of the 1960s. I therefore first consider the form of urban living being advocated.

3.1 What kind of urban living is being promoted?

The principle urban form associated with the urban renaissance discourse of the past decade draws heavily both on the work of Lord Rogers, with his vision of compact urban living, and on the ideas of the “New Urbanism”. Box 2 sets out the key principles for successful urban design recommended by the UTF, which was chaired by Rogers. Figure 3 *and appendices X and X* illustrate their conception of a high density, well connected set of urban neighbourhoods, which will help to foster successful communities. As an architect, Rogers emphasises the importance of good design, although some argue that his view of urban renaissance is overly dependent on design, underplaying the importance of good schools and services (e.g. Schoon, 2001). Nonetheless, these ideas provide welcome relief from decades of disastrous urban design.

Box 2: Key principles of urban design for the Urban Renaissance (from UTF, 1999)

1. **Site and setting** – design proposals should recognise that each location is socially and physically unique
2. **Context, scale and character** – designs should respect local traditions and relationships
3. **Public realm** – priority must be given to the design of the public realm to encourage a sense of safety and community
4. **Access and permeability** – walking and cycling should be easy, new developments permeable, car dependence minimised, and integration with public transport maximised
5. **Optimising land use and density** – development and use of services should be intensified where possible, taking into account privacy, sound insulation and safety
6. **Mixing activities** – diversity of activity and uses should be encouraged
7. **Mixing tenures** – monolithic single tenure should be avoided
8. **Building to last** – buildings should be designed to be durable and adaptable for different uses
9. **Sustainable buildings** – buildings should use durable materials, appropriate technology and orientation to minimise energy use and encourage recycling
10. **Environmental responsibility** – land should be regarded as a scarce finite resource; developments should be as compact as possible, and should enhance the environment (bio-diversity, using renewable resources)

Figure 3 – The key components of a mixed-use and integrated urban neighbourhood (Source: UTF, 1999)

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The vision of Lord Rogers and the UTF overlaps with the principles of “New Urbanism”, a design movement from the US that emerged in the late 1980s in response to similar problems of urban decay and sprawl. The definition of New Urbanism by the Congress for the New Urbanism in box 3 sets out its priorities.

Box 3: Definition of New Urbanism by the Congress for New Urbanism, cited in Campbell (2004)

New Urbanism is an urban design movement that burst onto the scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. New Urbanists aim to reform all aspects of real estate development. Their work affects regional and local plans. They are involved in new development, urban retrofits, and suburban infill. In all cases, New Urbanist neighbourhoods are "walkable", and contain a range of housing and jobs. New Urbanists support regional planning for open space, appropriate architecture and planning, and the balanced development of jobs and housing. They believe these strategies are the best way to reduce how long people spend in traffic, to increase the supply of affordable housing, and to rein in urban sprawl. Many other issues, such as historic restoration, safe streets, and green building are also covered in the Charter of the New Urbanism, the movement's seminal document.

Both sets of ideas are bold and optimistic. As John Thompson, architect and the chair of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) urbanism and planning group remarked “the scale of vision is [currently] at a level that it hasn’t been since the end of the Second World War” (cited in Campbell, 2004). Their translation into successful urban environments is of course a key challenge, and the problems with their realisation under current conditions are a major critique. However, essay aims primarily to set out potential benefits of urban living, rather than carry out an extensive assessment of their viability (although I will suggest that this is an important task, see section 6). I next set out the various strategic benefits of concentrating people in urban environments.

3.2 Concentration v dispersal and the housing crisis

3.2.1 Protection of the countryside

“If we still want a countryside worthy of the name, we will have to grow used to living in close proximity to one another” (Walker, 2003)

As one of the most densely populated countries in the world, the issue of where to build future housing in England is highly significant. Relatively unchecked urban sprawl during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly through greenfield housing and retail developments, caused alarm that both the countryside was being eroded, and also inner-city areas emptied. Having successfully fought for the introduction of greenbelts 60 years ago, amongst other issues, the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) has argued for many years that new homes should be concentrated in urban areas in order to indirectly protect the countryside. They are now a major campaigner for effective urban regeneration and urban renaissance (CPRE, 2003; see also CPRE/Civic Trust, 1998, CPRE, 1999). CPRE saw the government’s new housing policy summarised in PPG3 as a radical shift, from the old ‘predict and provide’ model, to a “more discerning approach known as ‘plan, monitor and manage’” (CPRE, 2003:2). However, the organisation has recently dismissed the government target for percentage of developments on brownfield sites (currently 60%), urging for a more ambitious 75% (Weaver, 2004).

*Figure 4 – A low density development despised by CPRE (Source: CPRE, 1999)
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Figure 5 – Pictures of successful high density urban environments from CPRE literature (CPRE, 1999)

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Government urban policy documents also recognise the co-dependence of rural and urban futures in the UK; the Urban White Paper calls for the preservation of the countryside, an “irreplaceable national resource” (DETR, 2000a), and the Urban Task Force writes that “ultimately, town and country are interdependent; [t]he welfare of one cannot be secured at the expensed of the other” (1999:38). Both documents refer to loss of tranquillity in the countryside as a motivator for the urban renaissance.

3.2.2 Brownfield development and high density urban living as a solution to the housing “crisis”

Building new homes in urban rather than rural or suburban areas is also attractive given what is described as the current national housing “crisis”. The subject of intense political and public debate, it is claimed that there will be an extra 3.8 million households needing homes by 2021 as a result of demographic changes (DETR, 2000a). The government wants to ensure that they are provided for, as “[e]conomic growth should not be frustrated by lack of homes” (DETR, 2000b:6). In particular, “key workers” (teachers, nurses, firemen etc) who carry out vital jobs, are often unable to find affordable homes in the South-East. However, the issue is complicated, and the very assumption of a housing shortage is questioned:

- Some critics argue with economist Kate Barker, in her recent Treasury sponsored review of housing argued (Barker, 2004) that the problem is in fact one of a shortfall in the construction of social and affordable housing than of housing per se.
- Others like CPRE point out that thousands of dwellings lie abandoned in various northern cities. This implies that the crisis is a problem of uneven regional development, which is much more complicated than an evenly spread housing shortage (see e.g. Mohan, 1999).

Nevertheless, in the South-East and East, accommodating additional households *is* an immediate problem, and how to do so a tense political question. The Urban Task Force (1999) points out that if the extra 3.8m extra homes reportedly needed were built at the prevailing density for new development, they would take up an area larger than Greater London. Such developments on greenfield sites are hotly contested, so the idea that such new housing might be accommodated in high density urban areas, through an urban renaissance, has gained considerable political currency.

Following publication of the Urban Task Force (1999) and the Urban White Paper, promotion of house building in urban areas became policy in the document PPG3: “[t]o promote sustainable patterns of development and make better use of previously developed land, the focus for additional housing should be existing towns and cities” (DETR, 2000b:5). Regional planning bodies are now required to follow a search sequence for sighting new residential developments. They must search for sites in urban areas first, and where PPG3 states that a target 60% of new homes should be created. A study for DETR (DETR, 1997) investigated how housing densities might be successfully increased in London. For the Southeast, DETR commissioned a special report to explain to LAs how urban renaissance might be the solution to the region’s congestion problems (Cadell & Falk, 2000; see also section 3.3.1).

“In a congested region, it is clearly advantageous if more of those who are willing to lead an urban lifestyle at higher densities with less use of the car, can be persuaded to do so – so that others who prefer suburban or more rural lifestyles will be able to do so that too, without more and more of the countryside being used up”. (Cadell & Falk, 2000:6)

Prescott has recently announced that growth in the South-East will be concentrated around four “growth areas”: Ashford in Kent, the Milton Keynes area, the M11 corridor and the Thames Gateway. While there is an emphasis on building on brownfield sites, the extent to which these will incorporate the features of Rogers’ vision of compact urban living is not yet clear.

3.3 Supporting more sustainable livelihoods

“Cities and towns have the potential to be the most efficient, the most ecologically sensitive and the most equalising environments. They have been so in the past” Giradet, 1996 cited in Rogers & Power (2000:142)

While cities remain for some the antithesis of an ecological future, they are an increasingly important object of attention for environmentalists. The majority of writing on cities and sustainability addresses the issue of how to make cities more sustainable (e.g. Riddell, 2004). Indeed, given that 80% of the UK population live in towns and cities (DETR, 2000a), as Hazel & Parry (2004:7) remark, “[c]ities cannot be ignored...we *must* find ways to make cities better places” (emphasis added). However, at the same time, others, including Lord Rogers and the UN Centre for Human Settlements (UNHCS, 1996), contend that cities themselves can be a sustainability *solution*. High density urban living can potentially be much less resource-intensive, and Rogers & Power (2000) in their book *Cities for a small country* argue that we cannot sustain anything more than such “compact” lifestyles. While the following section will explain how this might be the case, it should be remembered that urban living in itself is not inherently more sustainable than its rural or suburban counterparts (far from it). Rather, as will be explained, inhabitants of what Lord Rogers describes as “compact cities” can be potentially lower resources consumers than those of sprawling suburbia.

3.3.1 Reduced car dependence

The opportunity for reduced car dependence is a major attraction of compact city centre living. Urban living generally facilitates shorter journey times and enables greater use of walking and public transport than suburban or rural lifestyles, which are more dependent on the private car. This is very significant in the UK, given high levels of road congestion in regions like the Southeast (see section 3.1.2), and the extent of road traffic pollution (*→ EIYP stats*). Figure 6 from the UTF shows that across the world, higher density housing results in reduced fuel consumption per inhabitant. This is based on a survey by Newman & Kenworthy (1989), who found that the extremely low density urbanized areas of the US and Australia consumed over 6 times as much energy per capita as the very high density areas of Europe and the Far East. A number of other studies consider this link between urban form and fuel use, such as Holtzclaw (1994).

Higher densities (greater than 40 homes per hectare) make walk-able local services viable; the UTF (1999) breaks down a city into a series of local centres, proposing that no-one should have to walk more than 500m to their local centre. DETR (1997) calls these areas within a 10 minute walk of town centres “ped-sheds”. Public transport can be improved, and UTF research calculates that *X houses per hectare are needed to make a bus stop feasible*. Celebrated (though not unproblematic) mixed residential and commercial use developments additionally enable people to live and work in closer proximity. Walking to work thus becomes possible (see section 4.3).

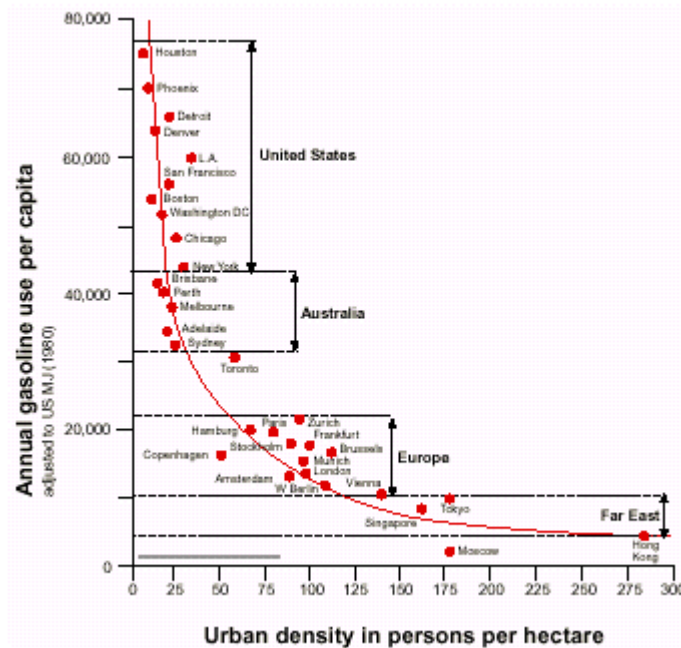


Figure 6 – Relationship between urban density and fuel consumption (Source: UTF, 1999)

Roger Levett’s scenario of housing in the UK in 2024 following a series of climate change scares also highlights the important link between the density at which we live and fossil fuel consumption, making a compelling case for urban living (figure 7). Writing for a speculative report on housing in 20 years time by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), he contends that as fuel prices transport policies necessarily make car dependent lifestyles expensive, urban areas may become to be seen as “privileged with opportunity” (Levett, 2004), and suburban estates as the new slums.

Figure 7 – “Housing in a Changed Climate” Roger Levett – Scenario 5 from The Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment’s Housing Futures 2024
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Reduced car dependence is recognised as important in the Urban White Paper, and is another motivator for an Urban Renaissance. However, while this is a highly commendable goal, critics like Wolmar (2004), writing in the publication *Regeneration & Renewal*, question government commitment to provide the enormous amount of investment into public transport which is needed to facilitate such sustainable communities, particularly in the South-East’s growth areas.

3.3.2 Other potential resource savings (?)

Energy saving through the reduced fuel consumption associated with compact urban development is highly significant, but such dwellings potentially bring other opportunities for minimising resource use. In an article on the benefits of high density living, amongst other benefits, Walker (2003) contends that lower surface area/dwelling achieved results in greater heat efficiency. He also proposes that shared space means that costs can be shared, so usually more expensive green energy becomes cost effective, citing the case study of the BedZed development in South London. This innovative high density development built on a former sewage plant relies on a combined heat and power unit that is fuelled by the capital’s tree waste

(www.bedzed.org.uk). The building is “zero energy”, meaning that it will not consume more energy than it produces, and it demonstrates the potential of new urban developments.

Nevertheless, while such projects are exciting, and reductions in fuel consumption highly appealing, I wish to point out that high density urban living does not necessarily impinge less on the environment in other senses, particularly in terms of consumption. Having just moved into a flat in the heart of London myself, I find that I will have to carry my recycling to the nearest recycling point on the bus, that I no means in my new flat of composting, and I wonder how often I will want to carry my bike up two flights of stairs after use to store it safely. This illustrates that high density dwelling can not be touted as an environmental solution alone; if urban-dwellers are also to be low consumers of non-fuel resources, then new services and facilities are required. Provision of adequate green space is also essential. Without it, we must ask whether the seemingly frequent current need of city-dwellers to “escape” from the city, often on cheap, short-haul flights, is in fact offset by the halo of compact urban living.

Lord Rogers’ vision of a particular form of urban living is radical and the extent of its filtration into government thinking is impressive (though not complete). Nevertheless, I would stress that while promoting urban living may protect existing countryside, urban living may still harbour deeply unsustainable lifestyles. Urban dwellers are not “doing their bit” simply by living in cities, and need to be encouraged and enabled to make sustainable choices in every area of their lives. Research to compare the impact of differing lifestyles on global and local environments seems essential. I would argue that more connection needs to be made between the utopian discourses of high density urban living, and the realities of how actual inhabitants live, and that the impact of how we live on the *global* as well as local environment should be brought to the centre of the political agenda.

3.3.3 Social Integration

New urbanism also sees urban living as a potential means to achieve social integration, and to assist social mobility. Richard Rogers argues that “cities make citizens”, and many commentators on urban regeneration refer to the social progress made in Britain’s towns and cities through the municipal urban planning of the Victorian era (e.g. Miliband & Hunt, 2004). Others see the close proximity of a diversity of people groups (class, race, religion, sexuality etc), living in well designed urban communities, as an opportunity for the growth of tolerance and acceptance of difference. The government’s stipulation in Section 106 that all new developments should include 25-30% of social housing is largely regarded as a positive step. While in reality developers frequently buy their way out of meeting this quota (Unsworth & Fox, 2003), successful examples of such mixed-tenure developments include the Nightingale estate in Hackney. 40% of dwellings within this high density redevelopment were built for occupation, and all of these were sold from the architects’ plans (Walker, 2003).

However, this vision remains largely that, a vision, and there has been insufficient time to see whether the few compact communities built so far achieve their goal. Meanwhile, there are plenty of inner-city areas for which social *disintegration* has

been far more dominant than integration. Racial tension in the inner-city London borough of Tower Hamlets, for example, is rife. However, this is not necessarily related to the fact that this is an urban area. Suzy Stride, a local youth worker, relates the racial tension experienced to the exceptionally high levels of deprivation in Tower Hamlets, which causes resentment and dissatisfaction. This again points to the importance of the *type* of urban development in the generation of sustainable communities. Exclusive gated dockland developments in the borough, built in the last 10 years and often adjoining deprived estates, may have brought upper class residents into the borough, but they have completely failed to bring about the social integration desired.

3.4 Cities in the “New Economy”

A final but important reason for encouraging people in the developed world to live in urban settlements relates to the position of cities in the “New Economy”. As key sites of “production” once again, it is vital for national economic wealth that a country’s cities are functioning well. Their role in the New Economy and the significance of the promotion of urban living in attracting these industries will be explained in the following.

3.4.1 The New Economy and the city

“Soft” New Economy industries are based around the production and processing of knowledge and information (e.g. bio-technology, film making, financial services), and these are now the drivers of developed countries’ economies. Coyle (1997) sets out how these industries are changing the way that we live and work. While some have contended that telecommunications will lead to a dispersion of work, she rightly argues that face-to-face interaction will become increasingly important. Consequently she proposes that “cities are posed for a big revival in the weightless world” (p xvii).

The financial and cultural production industries are two important New Economy sectors that are concentrated in cities. Financial flows in the globalised economy are not tied to particular places, rather are “de-territorialised” (*ref*). This said, there are “nodes” in the newly-mobile economic system, where exchange takes place and financial services provided, and these are the “world cities” of London, Tokyo and New York (Sassen, 1994). The booming cultural production industry (media, fashion-intensive consumer goods and services etc) is also largely based in urban areas. Scott (2001) examines the conditions that encourage cities, or at least certain cities, to act as creative fields, such as Hollywood and its film industry. He argues that urban areas allow the agglomeration of small firms which are necessary for the transfer of labour and ideas, “creative energy” through the “intricate webs of human exchange and relationships” (p12), and importantly proximity to their main market, as populations are concentrated in towns and cities.

3.4.2 Competitive cities and urban living environments

Cities can thus be seen to be important potential sites for New Economy industries. However, there is no guarantee that a particular city will harbour them. Indeed, Schoon (2001) argues that cities must fight to ensure that the clustering of these industries takes place in central urban areas, rather than in out-of-town science parks.

Individual cities must work hard to provide an attractive “package” that will lure or retain footloose information-based industries, or to offer a “creative milieu” that will foster the local growth of cultural industries (O’Connor, 1998). In this way, they have become “competitive cities”, competing with other cities across the developed world. This has formed an important part of the regeneration attempts of de-industrialised cities like Birmingham by local authority partnerships (see section 2.3). Attracting new employers has been a key aspect of the city’s regeneration, and the Eastside regeneration team is currently trying to foster a media quarter in the Digbeth old industrial inner-city area (Green, 2004).

However, providing attractive sites for businesses is usually not sufficient to attract New Economy industries to a city. Essential also for employers is providing an attractive living environment which the skilled workers that they wish to recruit want to live in, which forms another thread of the urban renaissance discourse. As will be seen, these professionals work long hours so often desire to live within walking distance of work, and have high expectations for cultural consumption. This can be seen within the gentrified areas of London’s Docklands around Canary Wharf, and the waterfront developments in a former industrial area of Leeds. Indeed the elite global workforce demand high quality central accommodation. Urban living, or at least a particular form of urban living, can be seen as a strategic investment tool, and LAs of these competitive cities market the attractive quality of life that they can offer (Rogerson, 1999). However, it should be remembered that positive urban living environments alone do not guarantee investment by New Economy industries in a particular city. Historic factors are also important (e.g. London and the financial industry), and businesses from industries in these sectors often cluster in specific locations (e.g. the computer games industry in Liverpool), so investment in all urban areas is not possible.

Nevertheless, it stands that individual cities have the potential to be the chosen residences of the workers of the New Economy. Promotion of a city’s living environment in this way is thus another strategic reason to assert the benefits of urban living. Strategic hopes that urban areas might be positive living environments are becoming realities in various places as local authority partnerships pour investment into the city-centres. However, as Schoon (2001) insists, urban areas must still be *chosen* by individuals. The next section considers what exactly it is that can make urban living attractive i.e. what are the benefits might be to individual inhabitants.

4. Urban living as a positive lifestyle – Benefits to individual inhabitants

4.1 Choice of living environment and quality of life

“The issue of where people want to live relies on a complex number of factors, including high quality environments, access to high quality public services and facilities, consumer choice, community safety, security and engagement” (CABE, 2004)

Those who have choices about where they might live (i.e. those with adequate incomes) make their decision based on an evaluation of the costs and benefits that an

area would afford them given their particular needs. Thus different areas would provide for a particular quality of life, or life satisfaction. Attempts to assess and compare of people's qualities of life have become popular over the past decade or so (Rogerson, 1997), and New Labour has increasingly framed its efforts to improve social well-being around this idea. In this way, important when considering the benefits of urban living is "what quality of life do urban areas afford?" Rogerson (1997) observes that quality of life is based on both the material environment, and personal life factors (figure X).

Figure X – Rogerson's (1997) "conceptual view of quality of life"

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While personal life factors are subjective, attributes of the material environment (health care, education facilities, leisure facilities, physical features, labour market conditions...) can be measured and compared, and therefore often form the basis of comparing people's quality of life. However, this can be problematic as the relative weight that people put on each factor varies between social groups: good schools are vital for young families, for example, whereas amongst other things, the elderly value being close to the shops (figure X). In this way, the pros and cons of an area balance out differently for different groups. Therefore, when considering the potential benefits of urban living, it is necessary to first note whom exactly these benefits apply to.

Figure X – Quality of life priorities for different age groups: % respondents indicating attribute 'very important' (Rogerson, 1997)

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4.2 Who is choosing urban living? "Urban living" and urban living

If "urban" is defined to include the city centre and inner-city, it is evident that populations of such areas are extremely diverse. This said, it is possible identify a set of social groups who have chosen a particular lifestyle associated with the urban core, known as "urban living", as opposed to those who experience urban living more simply as living in the city

4.2.1 "Urban living"

Figure X – A soon-to-be young professional's initial experience of "urban living"

(Source: The Evening Standard, 2004)

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The phenomenon of "urban living" is based around city-centres, but is now spilling into parts of the inner-city as developments formerly associated with the urban core (though still marketed as city-centre living) are built further from the centre. It is associated with prestige developments and gentrification in former industrial areas like London's Docklands, and the subsequent inflow of affluent new residents (*see ref*). People who have chosen this lifestyle share certain characteristics, having a large disposable income, and most notably being households without children. This said, these city-centre residents are not a homogenous group as an investigation by Allen & Blandy (2004) into the future of city-centre living for the ODPM showed. Their study divides city-centre residents into two distinct groups, summarised in figure X – young professionals, who will stay for a few years and several groups of "authentic" city

dwellers who are committed to the area for a longer time. Each of these groups enjoy “urban living”, making use of the city’s leisure and cultural opportunities, and characteristically frequently eating out. The profile of the imminent young professional in figure X illustrates such a lifestyle.

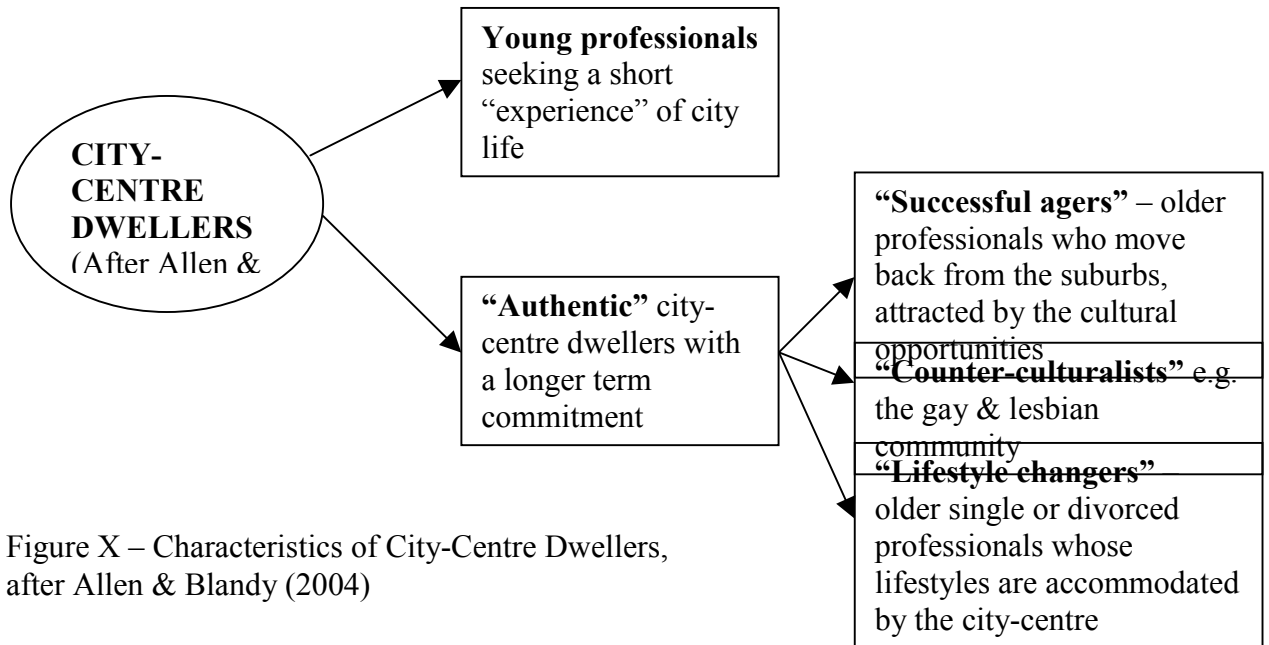


Figure X – Characteristics of City-Centre Dwellers, after Allen & Blandy (2004)

4.2.2 Urban living

Other residents of urban areas, who experience urban living more simply as living in the city, are from a wide range of social groups. Notably, many, including those in social housing, may have not necessarily *chosen* to live there, but do not have the means to exercise a choice over where they live. However, they experience the costs and benefits of life in the city regardless. There may also be middle/upper class urban areas which include a number of families e.g. Islington, London. Cadel & Falk (2000) also remark that the centres of smaller historic towns like Windsor might be promoted as attractive living environments for elderly people.

Next, the potential benefits for residents of both “urban living” and urban living are set out.

4.3 Proximity to work

Figure X – Reasons for moving into Leeds city centre – Unsworth & Fox (2003)

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As section 3.4 explained, many industries of the New Economy are clustering in urban areas, bringing with them a range of employment opportunities. In Leeds, there were 30,000 jobs in the financial and business services sector in 1991, and 92,000 in 2001, and 1,600 media businesses employing 12,000 people (Leeds Economy Handbook, 2002, and Urbed, 2002, both cited in Unsworth & Fox, 2003). Proximity to work is a key benefit living in urban areas, and a vital aspect of “urban living”. In

Unsworth & Fox's (2003) study of city centre living in Leeds, it was overwhelmingly cited as the major reason that their respondents moved to central Leeds (figure X). Just over half of respondents reported that they walked to work, which is five times the national average (figure x); of those who worked in the postcode district LS1, 90% walked to work.

Figure X – Travel to work in Leeds city centre (Unsworth & Fox, 2003)

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In addition to the environmental benefits (section 3.1), reduced commuting times result in a number of straightforward benefits for the individuals concerned. These include reduced stress and more free time, particularly important given the frequently long hours worked in these sectors (figure X). Schoon (2001), also remarks that working mothers can be close to their children if they live in the inner-city.

Figure X –Property advert in Central London emphasising potential proximity to work (Source:)

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4.4 Cultural opportunities and an increasingly pleasant physical environment

Over the past decade or so, massive investment into the centres of cities in particular has created greatly improved physical environments, and a range of new cultural facilities and events. Therefore in urban areas, the physical environment may no longer be seen as a cost of urban living; in fact with stimulating architecture and the (re)introduction of public art in public spaces (see Miles, 1997), the material environment of urban areas may increasingly be seen as a benefit of urban living. Certainly the increasing number of cultural and leisure opportunities in urban areas are seen as a major asset of living in the cities by many of their inhabitants. This has largely been through the work of innovative metropolitan local authorities who have pursued strategies of “cultural regeneration” to improve the outlook of their once declining cities (section 2.3). The public-private partnerships involved have massively transformed the centres of cities like Birmingham, once known as a “concrete jungle”.

- Example of Birmingham, include before/after regeneration pictures
- Noting – cultural opportunities outside of London - the International Conference Centre (ICC), Symphony Hall
- Pleasant urban environment - sinking the inner-city “motorway”, renovation of the Bull Ring shopping centre, opening up the canal

- But, critics – who is this landscape for? Is this renovation of the city centre at the expense of other parts of the city? Cities of spectacle with no substance

4.5 Vibrancy, energy, and contemporary cultural perceptions of cities

“[c]ities are the pulsing heart of modern life” (Hutton, 2004:vi)

- Local authorities also worked hard to change the image of their city – B’ham - huge city marketing campaign (see www.beinbirmingham.com).
- Changing cultural perceptions of the city more generally – Sex in the City, Friends etc – the city as an exciting place to live
“Public perceptions are at least as important as public money” (Best, 2001 – Schoon)
- Density bringing vitality (Rogers), making the most of human interaction
- This said, urban areas needn’t be as manic as this perception → Cittaslow

Box X – Urban living needn’t be manic! Box on Cittaslow movement

4.6 Tolerance and acceptance of ethnic minorities and alternative lifestyles

- An important benefit of urban living for these groups – the rest of their community is there, also a more tolerant culture (?)
- Would ethnic minorities choose the rural idyll? Or do they not because of racism etc
→ Kinsman

4.7 Persistent drawbacks

- Lack of green space
- Pollution
- But not inherent features of urban environments – can improve
- This said, Any location has positives and negatives. Urban Task Force (1999: 35) – attractive neighbourhoods able to provide “a competitive package of goods”, so that people *choose* them
- However, who experiences these benefits? How do costs and benefits balance out for different groups?

5. Social geography of urban living

- Distinct group of those who experience most of these benefits. Link with environmental justice
- Health needn’t be a problem – but health of the poor much worse → Schoon diagram
- Exclusivity of cultural activities – gated, and unaffordable
- If you can’t afford the good urban housing/don’t have a job, do any of these benefits matter?
- Caution that pleasant living environments alone aren’t going to solve problems

6. Conclusion and recommendations for further research

- Summary of findings
- Urban living – certainly beneficial politically and for those wishing to protect the countryside. Been shown that urban living has the *potential* to be a beneficial environment for *all* those living in cities – there is vision, but is it possible that this will materialise or just an unrealistic utopia?
- Need to think about how all urban environments might be beneficial, not just new developments. Lots of cash needed, not a quick fix solution.

- Extent to which high density living would reduce pressure on resources/ enable humans to give something back to nature (project definition). Or does it merely keep the middle-class NIMBYs of Middle England and conservationists happy, ignoring more profound questions about the impact of how all of us live on the global environment?
- Further research? NEEDED. This a very political subject, lots of fluff, hype – need grounded research to weigh up the real implications of urban living. Real benefits or just a political answer to the housing crisis?

Appendices

*Diagrams from UTF of high density living
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