

GREAT WESTLAND: Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods and New Garden Cities

1. Focussing on pressure points

West London is London's main high tech belt, and house prices have become unaffordable. Semi-detached London was built rapidly to service the factories that once lined the Great West Road.¹ The GWR did not want suburban commuters delaying its fast trains to Bristol, and built relatively few stations, so the Central Line is heavily overcrowded. But with Heathrow Connect, the opening of CrossRail, and main line electrification London can relieve housing and congestion pressures by developing around public transport nodes, and creating more balanced communities. Metroland provides a good model.

As examples, Uxbridge town centre at the end of the Metropolitan Railway is now more attractive than Stockley Park as a place to work, and there are many other centres with similar potential². Southall Gasworks is at last being developed by the Berkeley Group. Northolt is not needed as an airfield any more, and three nearby Underground Stations make it ideal for a New Garden City.³ All along the Grand Union Canal, which runs for fourteen miles to Paddington Basin without a lock, there are other neglected sites waiting to be developed. Award winning apartments at Brentford Lock West show what can be done. With new cycle ways and orbital rapid transit routes the untapped potential for housing London's growth is huge.⁴ The first step will boost quality as well as speed by releasing strategic sites..

2. Cascading demand

Doubling housing output depends on appealing to a wider range of markets. The greatest opportunity highlighted in the NLA's Brief are households with two or three spare bedrooms - the 'empty nesters', Isolated elders will welcome moving to carefree apartments with shops and services close by instead of under-performing retail parks. Many will carry on working part-time, taking pressure off the NHS and filling skill gaps. By moving they release a house with a garden for an expanding family or two to put 'sweat equity' into doing it up, and getting on the housing ladder.

Under-used industrial sites can be developed for co-housing or custom-building (as in Almere in the Netherlands, or Freiburg, Germany). This takes much of the risk out of development and cuts costs by 25%. A balance of ages makes better use of expensive infrastructure, such as schools, and help regenerate peripheral Council estates. The second step takes the risks out of house-building, and reduces land costs.

3. Going to scale

Overcoming the shortages of –labour, materials, and building firms requires the approach used in Continental cities or commercial property.⁵ Joint ventures with local authorities will

¹ Alan Jackson, *Semi-Detached London: Suburban development, life and transport 1900-1939*, Wild Swan 1991

² Nicholas Falk, *Over the Edge? Town Centres and the London Economy*, URBED 2008

³ David Rudlin and Nicholas Falk, *Grow Your Own Garden City*, Planning in London, 2014

⁴ *Tapping the Potential: assessing urban housing capacity*, URBED for DETR, 2000

⁵ *Beyond Ecotowns*, PRP URBED and Design For Homes, PRP 2008

simplify the planning and land assembly process. Serviced plots for 60-80 homes speed up building and achieve scale economies. Modern Methods of Construction, for example using a new form of concrete made from blast furnace slag, can overcome shortages of bricks and save energy.

Contracts with major local employers, such as hospitals or airlines, would reduce the risks still further through the Private Rental Sector. PWC forecast that by 2025 40% of under 40s will be renting from private landlords, more in London, and in Reading house prices went up 10% last year, The third step cuts building costs and profit margins.

4. Designing for lifelong communities

Too many schemes start with great ambitions and then suffer from neglect. The public realm should be transferred to property endowed trusts that can respond to changing demands and support 'lifelong communities'.⁶ There is huge scope for creating places of greater character in Outer West London by bringing the countryside into the town, connecting with the Colne Valley Park that runs from Rickmansworth to Heathrow.

Why shouldn't West London have a 'green grid' with country parks to match those of East London (compensating for the environmental damage from airlines and motorways)? Innovative housing in green settings can be stimulated through a Building Exhibition to promote 'healthy new towns'.⁷ The key is 'active stewardship', as in the Great Estates that built valued places such as Bloomsbury. The fourth step provides the long-term security needed for raising capital at lower cost.

5. Funding smarter growth

Progress ultimately depends on channelling long-term finance into building more and better neighbourhoods, not just buying existing homes. The key is getting hold of appropriate land on new transport corridors at a price that makes quality investment viable. By fixing land values at the time sites are identified for housing, as in Germany, the uplift in land values from development could be captured and ploughed back in making serviced plots available.⁸

Whether through Development Corporations (as at Old Oak Common) or Joint Ventures (as at Barton Park in Oxford), the models are there if local authorities have the courage to use them. The GLA could kick start the process by issuing a Growth Bond for £350 million (as Cambridge University has recently done). Ealing, Harrow, Hillingdon, and Hounslow Councils can then compete to become partners in developing Great Westland as sustainable urban neighbourhoods applying New Garden City principles.⁹

⁶ Nicholas Falk, Lifelong Communities: how older people can add value, Housing LIN Viewpoint, 2013

⁷ Nicholas Falk, Ben Kochan, and Gareth Potts, London's Suburbs: Unlocking their potential, GLA 2007

⁸ Nicholas Falk and Barry Munday, The ABC of Housing Growth and Infrastructure, The Housing Forum, 2014

⁹ David Rudlin and Nicholas Falk, Uxcester Garden City submission that won the 2014 Wolfson Economics Prize www.urbed.coop

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