



## 2013 Remaking Cities Congress

Planning and Social Innovations for Post-Industrial Cities

Thought Leader Summary

# Community Rights, Community Architecture and Lean Urbanism

**Hank Dittmar**

Prince's Foundation, London, England

October 3, 2013

Many have observed we are in the "Urban Century," and that over two billion more people will be living in cities by 2030. By and large global urbanisation is viewed as a supply issue: can we build cities fast enough to store all of these people? The assumption is that we must do so through standardisation and mass production, pouring the new urban dwellers into a series of waiting vessels. And often this means reverting to the failed modernist planning idea of towers in the park, sometimes dressed up with landscape urbanism, but bearing an eerie resemblance to failed estates of the Sixties and Seventies.

Another assumption is that global urbanisation is largely a developing world issue. But the globalisation of capital and investment and the emergence of a global cosmopolitan elite and middle class is reshaping developed cities all over the world, not just in India, Brazil and China. And the desire for commodified investments is driving a standardisation of real estate models world wide, and homogeneity is beginning to afflict cities both North and South.

Aldo Rossi famously said the city is the collective memory of its inhabitants, and I fear we are eroding our heritage and identity building by building, as we reproduce the same buildings globally. At the same time, it seems that this approach is failing to tap into the entrepreneurial energy that is so evident in creative cities like London and Vancouver, resurgent cities like Pittsburgh, Manchester, Medellin and New Orleans and developing cities like Shanghai, Chennai and Shenzhen.

Is there another approach to the urban century which builds on local identity and place, and extends the commitment to community engagement and revitalisation made by participants in the first Remaking Cities Congress. I believe there can be and that such a framework is emerging in the interface between the insurgent energy on the ground at the neighbourhood scale for placemaking, and the emerging idea of community rights.

### **Community Rights**

The last five years has seen the introduction of a new concept into the English planning and governmental system: the idea of community rights. England has long been a plan led system, with authority coming down from the central government to local authorities to develop local planning frameworks that meet government growth targets.

England's Coalition government has introduced the concept of localism and seeks to allow communities and neighbourhoods to opt into the planning and development system. The Localism Act, which received Royal Assent in 2011,

## Remaking Cities Congress

introduced a series of new Community Rights: including a Community Right to Build, a Community Right to Bid, Neighbourhood Planning and Neighbourhood Development Orders. These are permissive powers, in which a neighbourhood which self organises can take on various rights, including the right to develop its own plan, the right to bid on excess property, the right to build community facilities even if not programmed by the local government, and can exercise these rights through local referenda.

It is early to judge the success of these Community Rights. But the first neighbourhood plans are emerging, local plans are coming forward and many developers are pushing forward proposals in the interval before local plans are approved.

At the same time, stimulated by cash from government, neighbourhood plans are underway across England, and pubs and important local facilities are being saved under the Community's Right to Bid and the Right to Build. Neighbourhood plans could provide the opportunity for communities to work with architects and planners to do the shaping up front, and neighbourhood development orders could include clear design guidance expressing the physical form desired. In my experience, communities are eager to engage in design led planning and able to make tough choices. There are challenges, as many of the communities which have exercised these right are the better off ones, and getting these kind of tools into the hands of poorer communities in need of revitalisation will require extra investment and support.

### **Community Architecture and Design**

Earlier this year England saw the republication of Nick Wates and Charles Knevit's classic book on Community Architecture, and it coincides with the rebirth of community architecture as a movement in the UK.

More and more architects are getting involved in projects as demonstrations or popups, and more and more young architects are seeing underemployment as an opportunity to do community work. Yet the tools that could link community design to communities are not being exploited fully by a planning profession that has largely not seen planning as a design discipline.

Community right to build, self build and neighbourhood development orders could all be used by community entrepreneurs and community architects to identify gap sites, designate them as opportunities and advance proposals together with residents. Over the years I have found that the best development is often done by small builders with background or passion for design. As we think about the changing shape of the profession, maybe one new role for the architect is as a community entrepreneur -- or even, as in the case of George Ferguson, former RIBA President, as Mayor of Bristol.

### **A Leaner Urbanism**

The great divide in urbanism has always been between those who espouse the grand project — like Ebenezer Howard, Daniel “make no small plans” Burnham, Baron Haussmann and Le Corbusier — and those who celebrate the messy organic approach, exemplified by Jane Jacobs, Christopher Alexander and the community architecture movement. The scale of our economic challenges and the growth of cities worldwide are leading many today to call for big plans.

## Remaking Cities Congress

In England, The Town and Country Planning Association has called for a new generation of garden cities, just as during the last government they called for eco-towns. Certainly, doing some things fast and big is essential. But though the urban designer in me loves a clean slate, the grand projects seem to be easier to draw than to get built.

What's more, the gradual approach and sensitive knitting-together may be all we can afford at the present time—and it often seems to be what people want. Everywhere I go, small, funky workspaces are fully occupied, yet we don't seem to focus on making more of them. The usual approach to an under-utilised asset has been to put a new icon beside it, instead of figuring out how to clean it up, provide some social, tech and business infrastructure and get it into occupation. Trinity Buoy Wharf and the Tea Building in London, Birmingham's Custard Factory and Jewellery Quarter, and Bristol's Tobacco Factory are all good examples of reoccupation of older buildings gradually leading to more ambitious projects and the creation of hubs for innovation and knowledge. The regeneration of the seaside community of Folkestone as an artists quarter got it right by putting the icon in last, after the community building part. In each case it took an entrepreneur with drive, patience, some undervalued space and the will to pursue the projects incrementally. All of these projects are job-creators, and all are founded on a yeasty mix of small and medium enterprise and creative and cultural assets. There is a lot to learn from them, and perhaps a learning network needs to capture information from community entrepreneurs.

In contrast, most local growth-planning still seems to go into attracting inward investment, big sheds on big sites, business or industrial parks, and thinking in a zoned way rather than seeing jobs as part of the urban ecosystem. Small business space is seldom retrofitted or built, as that must be done speculatively, and while it can pay for itself, does not produce large margins. Some of this is down to planning and building regulations, and one hopes that barriers to the conversion of old buildings and to the building of low-spec space can be tackled.

With American colleagues including Andres Duany I have begun to call this approach lean urbanism — to reflect the shift from strategic projects conceived in boom times to placemaking that is Incremental, lower-cost and participatory. Projects to transform a street, a square or a building often become the catalyst for longer-term revitalisation, and I see encouraging signs of tactical architecture and urbanism in efforts as diverse as Mary Portas's High Street Pilots, We Made That's work with the Architecture Foundation, and some emerging neighbourhood plans.