

Edge Debate 71 - Can Decentralisation Solve the Housing Crisis?

3rd February 2016 – Ramboll, 240 Blackfriars Road, London, SE1 8NW

WELCOME

Thanks to Ramboll for hosting the event.

Chair: **Charlotte Alldritt**,
 Director of Public Services and Communities, RSA Previously
 Secretary to the RSA City Growth Commission

Speakers: **Luke Raikes**, IPPR North
James Dunnett, James Dunnett Architects
John Sampson, URBED
Kathryn Firth, Urban Designer and Masterplanner

Luke Raikes

The idea of rebalancing the country has been discussed for a while. It wasn't until the Chancellor used the term "Northern Powerhouse" that it received the interest it has now.

The North-South divide is clear, but the North is not a poor and unproductive place. The North has a significant economy with similar growth to London. The North has international recognised universities, significant airports and ports. It's not a matter of the North lagging London, it's London ploughing ahead at a huge speed.

The North isn't in decline, but it could do better. Firstly the North shouldn't be like London, London is a global city that competes with other global cities like New York. London has high productivity, but it also has high poverty, unemployment and unhappiness. Joining Northern cities together isn't in their interest.

The North needs a policy based on what the Northern cities have been pushing for and will allow them to grow. They need investment, both public and private to provide better connectivity, to utilise the ports and to encourage R&D. We need to create more jobs, to improve productivity and invest more in education and skills development. Most importantly the North needs more control over its own affairs.

This isn't a quick fix, we need a decade for decentralisation to really happen. And this isn't about the North vs the South but about appreciating the uniqueness of the North.

James Dunnett

London has soaring house prices and a rapidly growing population. Current methods of moving small departments out of London aren't working. The UK has 13% of its population in a single city, while Italy for comparison has 4% and the USA has 2%.

Moving London isn't as radical as it sounds. Japan has had a commission since 1990 to separate its government and centre of commerce into separate places. In 1911, Australia held a competition to move the capital inland to make it safer from coastal dangers. This may have even inspired the move of India's capital four months later. The decision then was kept a secret until it was finally announced, understandably making everyone very angry. But it also meant that New Delhi, a garden city was planned and built.

London has always been two cities, with the Government based separately to the centre of commerce, and as both have grown they have become a single city. In 2011 at the centenary of the move of the Indian capital, James proposed moving the capital and suggested West Bromwich. At the time it had the highest number of vacancies on its high street, situated at the centre of a motorway between two urban centres with lots of undeveloped space.

Capitals have been moved, and when they have, they have encouraged new ways of thinking about planning cities.

John Sampson

URBED is one of the few practices to be based outside of London and have access to opportunities that others don't, working with Sheffield to propose how the city might grow. Few countries have as big a difference between their biggest city and their second biggest city as the UK. Lots of the UK's other cities are planning to grow with ambitious targets, Manchester at 16% and Sheffield at 14%.

Edge Debate 71 - Can Decentralisation Solve the Housing Crisis?

3rd February 2016 – Ramboll, 240 Blackfriars Road, London, SE1 8NW

Previously there have been competitions to build new garden cities, but it would be better to extend an existing one. In order for Sheffield to meet its target it needs to build 100,000 new homes. Developers are keen to develop green field sites, but these are unconnected and will remain so for some time. Sheffield has 80,000 brownfield sites, which could be used instead.

You need compulsory purchase orders to buy all these small sites and connect them together and a more organised planning system. Sheffield wants to grow, if it proves it can build those 100,000 homes then it should succeed.

Kathryn Firth

We need to start thinking about housing in a new way, in how we use our homes in the 21st century and how our relationships with work have developed. We can learn a lot from examining existing building stock, but it doesn't mean that we should just return to building terrace houses. A number of architecture school offices are in converted Georgian houses, there must be a reason why they have been so successful and we should look for the reason.

There are lots of new ideas, looking at ways people can live more efficiently. Multigenerational houses are increasingly common and houses with a back garden unit to act as an office or provide space to another generation.

Hackney has always had a mixture of industries, with blurred edges between what the different areas are used for. Different groups have moved in and made it less affordable but the idea is still there. Co-making spaces with shared yards, a workshop space during the day, a play space for children in the afternoon and a venue for parties in the evening. We need to understand how we can use the existing fabric as our ideas of privacy change.

There are challenges to this; planning regulations are difficult, prices mean land is being made into living spaces only. Housing policy needs to develop; there has been some progress with custom build giving people more control over their space. More help is needed with affordability, separate to affordable housing. Making self-build or community build more affordable and letting people choose to share a large garden rather than a smaller single one.

Ideas have been developed for more unique designs in Cornwall, but planners are afraid of the consequences. Co-housing is a deliberate approach to sharing space, but there are currently few examples integrating with the existing fabric. The OWCH project with shared caring services between neighbouring properties. There are issues with intensification, we are currently low density and it can be fixed by building in those awkward places instead of going taller.

We don't use space well, we need more housing, more community spaces and this issue is facing all cities from London to Sheffield.

Q&A.

The housing crisis is an economic crisis, if it weren't for migration London would see a net reduction in population. As young people migrate, this has meant that most people in their 20s are sharing and there is an appetite for alternative solutions in co-housing and custom build.

On the other hand, we don't just need more housing; there is a lot of currently empty and unused property in London. This is a big issue from the international financial industry; it has become more profitable to invest in housing than in the manufacturing industry. Other governments have seen this as an incentivised decentralisation.

Convincing people to move out of London requires places to be attractive and the work to be attractive. Creating jobs in Sheffield won't have the same attraction as being in a financial centre or a creative area. People want fulfilment in their work and culture.

Creating new places is difficult, when newly built cities in places like Milton Keynes are made in places with fewer objections; they end up without sufficient transport links or culture.

The UK should have done more to protect manufacturing but unfortunately that opportunity has gone. London is one of the few places with a spatial economy and we may look back and wish we had done more to protect it.