



Notes for Edge presentation at Big Meet 2

October 2014

The Edge is a multidisciplinary built environment think tank with members drawn from across the built environment professions and beyond. We have links with the RIBA, RICS, ICE, IStructE, CIBSE, CIOB, SocEnv and the Energy Institute at UCL and the CIC.

As a group committed to the idea of multi-disciplinarity in the built environment we are very supportive of the idea of the Place Alliance but don't feel that it has found its mission yet.

If it wants to be a gathering for those concerned about place quality to meet and discuss their joint enthusiasm and purpose all well and good but we feel that the urban environment has a vital job, several vital jobs, to do that are where the focus of any alliance should be.

Two weeks ago, to coincide with the climate talks in New York, the economist Nick Stern issued the New Climate Economy Report spelling out the need to urgently tackle greenhouse gas emissions. At the launch Stern wrote

"The evidence shows that better planned cities based on mass public transport systems tend to be economically more dynamic and have much higher quality of life than those based on urban sprawl. They also have much lower carbon emissions. As a billion more people join the world's urban population over the next 15 years, building smarter cities creates a huge opportunity to reduce the path of emissions at the same time as improving economic performance and social conditions."

Stern in this short statement pulls together the two big themes that city designers, managers and governors need above all to tackle. These themes are also why there are major reasons why a Place Alliance is essential, but only if it is going to remember to deal with the big, existential issues. I say this because I see in the prospectus a defensive idea about place quality – defending the status quo, albeit 'safeguarding, enhancing and enriching' it. This is in danger of being enhanced nostalgia, which combined with an inward focus on England, little England even, could be deeply problematic if not, in the context of the current debate on nationalism, poisonous.

Cities are going to have to deal with the consequences of climate and

demographic change - certainly reactively and if we have any sense proactively and actively proactively.

On climate change cities need, for the sake of our futures, to make good on delivering the low carbon future. In this country we are legally committed to reducing our carbon emissions by 80% (from 1990 levels) by 2050 and as The Carbon Plan spells out this means achieving close to zero emissions from the entire built environment sector – including that already built, vastly reduced transport emissions and giving over most of the remaining allowance to industry. This means essentially zero carbon towns and cities – not something that we are even close to being able to deliver yet – but that will require a very different version of our urban environments.

And if that seems hard we have to factor in the climate change that is going to happen anyway as a result of all the emissions dumped into the atmosphere since the start of the industrial revolution. International climate talks are struggling with keeping it to a 2 degree rise by the end of the century it seems more likely that it will be closer to 4 degrees.

Two degrees will lead to

“Extreme heatwave summers across Europe, with rainfall loss and wildfires, loss of the Greenland ice sheet and glaciers leading to a metres high sea water rise, insect invasions and plant death”

Four degrees will be far worse.

We are going to have to adapt our northern urban environments to very different climate circumstances. Some suggest that means Mediterranean conditions but it may be more violent than that, and the combined threat of floods and seawater rise may even lead to the abandonment of many urban areas. Helping to make our towns and cities resilient and liveable in a changed climate sounds like a pretty good task for a Place Alliance.

But you can't ignore the other subject that Stern mentions in the paragraph quoted, population, and specifically the rise in urban population.

In the same week as Stern released his report a paper in the Journal Science broke with the consensus that the planet's population was going to level out at 10 billion (it is currently 7.2 billion). The latest finding suggests an 80% probability of a population in 2100 between 9.6 and 12.3 billion. The great majority of whom will certainly live, or attempt to live, in cities. But while the UK population rise is not going to be anything like this order we have problems of our own.

- The London Mayor is expecting London's population to rise to 11 million by 2050 putting intense pressure on all aspects of the built

environment.

- That part of the UK population of 65 is set to almost double from 10 million in 2010 to 19 million by 2050 – 25% of the population.
- Happily Britain and England is a far more diverse place than it was 70 years ago, at the end of WWII. It will continue to get more so – not least because the pressures from climate change and the need for more workers to balance our ageing demographic. But as we know our cities need to work hard to bring different groupings together and not let monocultural zones develop.

Demographic change is a critical issue in our cities and towns. Already we aren't building anything like enough housing, schools, transport provision or developing adequate open spaces. Our cities are going to have to change to accommodate a greater, more demanding and differently constituted population, to become denser and better at providing all the services required to allow them to work. This is a critical place issue – like so many others.

Whether we like it or not cities and urban environments are going to be the solution to these problems. Solutions that may or may not work and ranging from the disastrous to the possibly quite good. Our job, surely, is to help ensure that they are as successful as possible.

So what should a Place agenda look like?

- With a resolute focus on long term planning - It needs to look forward rather than back
- It should be pressing for positive change rather than holding too tightly onto cherished ideals
- A campaign for better urban environments – especially the ordinary unloved places
- Interested in the retrofit of existing places more than in the creation of new ones
- A body backed by the Institutions, professional groups, client bodies, property organisations and the many other stakeholders but free to speak out on its own behalf as it sees fit.
- A body willing and able to consolidate and commission the necessary research
- With a publishing programme (in hard copy and on-line)
- Ideally an organisation that already exists.