

New Urban Areas Group

The New Urban Areas Group of the Commission was established in February 2004 with four terms of reference.

- 1) To understand the characteristics of new urban areas, both existing and those proposed by the *Sustainable Communities* proposal (e.g. Milton Keynes, Ashford, Thames Gateway).
- 2) To share information and experience with those working in these areas and those researching about them.
- 3) To discern the changing nature of 'community' in these areas, and to explore what contribution can be made, by churches and others, to their greater well-being
- 4) To explore the nature and shape of church presence, which may be more appropriate and viable in these areas

The New Urban Areas Group had several meetings to explore these issues, including visits to areas undergoing rapid housing-led expansion, including Milton Keynes and North Kent. The group also reviewed the experience of the Thamesmead development via a social history account written from a community development perspective. (Wigfall, 1997)

The New Urban Areas Group is also aware of other key initiatives in this growing interest area. These include a co-sponsored BURA and Church in Society Conference entitled *Belonging and Identity in New Neighbourhoods* held in Kent in March 2005 and addressed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and a consultation hosted by Churches Together in England in September 2004, entitled *Shaping the Church to Serve Major Housing Development*.

The purpose of this report has three aims.

- 1) To reflect some of the key themes and experiences encountered by the New Urban Areas Group during the lifetime of the Commission.
- 2) To describe the key points of learning we want to carry forward into future debates and policy initiatives on this area as a matter of some urgency
- 3) To recommend proposals for future research into this increasingly significant form of urban development, including implications for church identity and mission and theological reflection.

Seven key themes and experiences

1) Security and Convenience

The group observed, especially based on field visits, that one appeal for many of new suburban living is that these areas offer a kind of security. The safety of the home as a

space of controlled entry and exit, supported by surveillance and control networks (e.g. neighbourhood watch, CCTV and in some cases controlled access to residential areas by means of electronic security systems or gates) is mirrored in the increasingly 'safe' activity of shopping. The design layout of Milton Keynes shopping centre (for example) is designed to provide maximum choice and convenience within a secure and risk-averse setting. The notion of convenience is naturally predicated on mobility (usually car mobility), thus raising important questions about the availability of cheap and efficient transport infrastructure for those who cannot afford to run a car. The question was raised by the Chatham conference about 'icons' – i.e. the importance of urban spaces and physical structures that provide opportunities for encountering questions and values that move beyond these two priorities of security and convenience.

Does a Christian believe that risk is necessary to human flourishing and that the risk-averse environments now being built foster sterility, where there is little space for trying out alternative ways of being together. Eric Kuhne, architect of the Bluewater shopping mall, has spoken about his endeavour to introduce question and challenge into its design, in order to attract people and to entice them to reach beyond the given. Churches have always sought to do the same, but like the well-designed shopping mall is the church offering a sanctuary which largely saves us from the really challenging encounter of the Other?

Whether the safety offered by these suburbs and controlled 'public' spaces can be sustainable is a moot point. We do not have the natural resources required to see future generations commuting to work and shop across great distances and yet we are predicating much of our present design on that infinite availability of cheap transport. As a nation, we are also now questioning whether our systems of national and local governance are sufficiently robust to manage the tensions of frustrated aspiration which drive these communities. The estates and communities of the 60s were designed by our predecessors who wholeheartedly believed that they had learnt the lessons of the past – but just how sustainable have their designs proved to be?

2) Consumers and self-constructed identities

The appeal of new suburban living is mediated through the appeal to home and garden improvement and reinforced by large distribution and retailing hubs dedicated to these agendas. An explicit message which fuels consumerism, often reinforced by life-style television, is the desire to strive for some sort of individual identity in the midst of conformity (often reinforced by poor levels of housing design). Other features of consumer identity revolve around fashion, sport/leisure and popular culture, which are also catered for in 'industrial-size' quantities, thus enabling consumers to access choice and value for money in pursuit of identity construction. A group member commented on a visit to Milton Keynes, 'People are trying to live something that they want to believe in.'

The built environment plays a large part in forming human identity. In any culture, the symbolic nature of our homes and public places is paramount – they help us tell the story of who we are. Yet much of what is currently being built around the UK is based on 'same size fits all' aesthetics – the cul-de-sac suburb or the high street

uniformity. No wonder this leads people who want an individuality to search for that not in their locality but in their networks of friends and interests. Some will have both local and global identities, relating to relatives on the other side of the world. For people such as these, the acquiring of human identity has become something more than belonging and is no longer dependent on the local, but is now a 'hybrid' form made up of both local and global elements. The identity of the Holy Trinity perhaps will help us come to terms with our new processes of individuation in this environment.

3) Lack of extended support systems

The change in the family unit from the extended, locally-gathered model to one where the unit size is much smaller and dispersed is profound. People tend to buy houses before they are married or have families, family size is smaller and the rise in divorce creates larger numbers of small or single households. The creation of these smaller units and the ever-increasing numbers of housing they need puts increasing strain on both natural and community infrastructure.

We need to ask whether the present policy of acceptance of these atomising trends is best for society. Are we designing suburbs which are making it even more difficult to learn what social and local responsibility might be? Is it necessary for human flourishing to learn the skills of real-time rather than virtual community living, for if it is, we seem to be tacitly negating that possibility. The churches offer local opportunity to learn and affirm these skills and to distinguish between mature and immature forms of dependency.

4) Short-term contracts and mobility

The business practices engaged in by many companies and businesses as part of the need to cut costs and remain globally competitive involve outsourcing, short-term contracts etc. This has introduced an element of uncertainty about the future and also the inevitability of change of job and often location within a working lifetime. Employment patterns are one of the major contributing factors to the increased mobility that is a feature of post-industrial and globalised employment for many citizens, leading to greater transience and migration. Research into later new towns such as Milton Keynes and Telford (Baker, 2002) suggests that many people highly rate the convenience of living in communities which are well-connected to other travel networks, have a wide variety of easily accessible retail outlets, high-performing schools and provide safe 'enclaves of interim intimacy' (Reader, 2005). We also have much evidence to show that many of the new housing estate houses on major commuting tracks are bought for letting by investors not local people or are owned by corporations for their mid-week employees.

As our economic structures now demand that we accustom ourselves to short-term contracts, so that has its knock on effect in our family and community commitment. Is it totally counter-cultural in these new areas to work for the building of 'community' when it is decreasingly a concern for people who network non-geographically? Should the church become the host and introduce people to one another again locally or go with the trend and set up distanced worship events to which worshippers journey along the commuting paths where we market ourselves

accordingly? Is there a sense in which ‘sacred’ space is that place where one simply feels safe and protected (for example, one’s home or pub)? Is it wasting our time to tell the stories which may change bleak spaces into cherished places? And how do we also talk about ‘God’s presence in the community’ without recourse to language about ‘church’?

5) The creation of a miserable new middle-class

The themes identified so far lead to extraordinary amounts of stress on families living in new suburban communities. Dangerous levels of indebtedness caused by high mortgages and costs associated with home improvements, lack of extended support structures, stress involved in commuting long distances and long work hours and the demands of juggling a sustainable life work balance (especially when both adults in a family unit are working) expresses itself in variety of forms – depression, ill-health, drug and alcohol addiction, but most worryingly, domestic violence which members of our group report is already emerging in new Thames Gateway areas. In the early phases of the New Towns, a range of acute and chronic mental health issues unearthed the sociological syndrome described as New Town Blues. American research into ex-urban life (Soja, 2000) and anecdotal evidence being gathered in new UK areas suggests that some form of new town blues is still in evidence and represents a dark and hidden side to the surface of a comfortable and successful lifestyle. Having moved deliberately to a newly built area to escape the fear of crime and insecurity, another more internal insecurity raises its head. Would it have been better to help such folk learn to enjoy the contested space of the city?

All this is to say nothing of those who are displaced by or abandoned in favour of the new developments. Often they are excluded from access to work, services and decent housing. In some cases the ‘re-development’ of older areas is attended to merely by appending or ‘bolting-on’ new areas in the hope of some trickle down of benefit accruing to the older run-down area. Thus far we have seen no good evidence of this treatment meeting with success, but once again by exclusion. Some new developments are built right alongside older areas but substantial walls or ‘fire-breaks’ are built in order to maintain the distinction between the areas, and hence uphold the prices of the new.

The stress is felt not only by the populace but also by the natural environment. In the Thames Gateway large housing estates are even now being built right under forests of electricity pylons and over heavily toxic post-industrial land. Further down the Thames estuary, as elsewhere, the anxiety of living in estates built in dangerous flood plane localities exacerbates the stress.

6) The importance of local leadership

Our discussion of the Thamesmead experience highlighted the importance of visionary local leadership, which in this case was supplied by two or three dynamic social entrepreneurs who were church based and resourced. This was because churches were among the first community groups to be present and active in new estates and new towns. Much of what they did in Thamesmead was inspired by the need to ‘invent its own history’ which included community shows and multi-cultural festivals, community newsletters, community radio etc. While Thamesmead is

different to Thames Gateway the question is raised that if local space and belonging is fostered by some sort of common experience and a shared sense of history and identity, how is this to occur and who will help provide it? Can and/or should churches and other faith groups be incubators for local leadership and promoters of social capital in these complex new areas made up of local and global flows, new and existing 'communities'? There are stunning examples of activity of this sort. In East London the new Stratford City development has met with local Christians who have engaged politically through election to the Local Authority and through neighbourhood groups and committees with such success that the Section 106 gains that they have helped to negotiate alongside colleagues amounts to billions of pounds. In this case of course there was already in existence a strong East London community but in many areas due for development no community already exists and so it is almost impossible to build a community engagement from the bottom up. Planners and developers are then left largely to their own devices and vast swathes of unserviced housing so often results.

7) *Hubs of unintentional community*

This phrase describes the new forms of sociology emerging within post-industrial urban settlements and with which the church needs to engage. Ferdinand Tonnies' famous definition in the 19th century divided communities into sharply defined oppositions. *Gemeinschaft* is the space of community which follows the village model and revolves around family and neighbours, transmits norms and values and reflects a common purpose within a small geographical location. *Gesellschaft* is the space of association, urban in form which stresses individual choice and rationality and defines us in the particular role and service we provide rather than who we are within a community. Communities of association are complex and geographically dispersed. Recent additions to these basic categories are concepts such as *light sociality* (the coming together and dispersing of groups around particular spaces or events), *bunds* (internet or cheap travel based associations chosen on the basis of mutual sentiment, emotional feeling or niche interest), *friends* (the 'families we now choose'), *diasporic* communities and new tribalisms (based on voluntary membership rather than cultural or ethnic prerogatives), the *politics of pity* (sympathy for victims of global disaster) and so on.

The new hubs of unintentional community are places where people happen to congregate and unwittingly find new human connections, often as byproducts of other consumer or leisure interests. Such hubs include schools (increasingly important as social hubs), health clubs, shopping malls, cafes at hypermarkets, sporting and live music events. The institutional Church has in the past attended to these connections through establishing chaplaincies but the demise of community commitment and the new trend towards new ways of being unintentional community demands of the Church more attention to this phenomenon. Human beings have a need to root themselves in some way, but the traditional geographically located parish on its own may not serve us so well today.

Ten sharp questions we want to carry into the future (see research proposal)

Theological/Planning

- 1) What 'city' are we searching for? What aspects of new urban life enable people to develop and grow in ways that God has created them to be, and what aspects prevent this growth? In order to build places where human beings can flourish, should we be planning new urban areas which are risk-averse or can we plan to open ourselves to the unexpected challenge?
- 2) Where is the transcendent in the new urban areas? What are their new icons and what gods do they point to? What can a qualitative new urban spirituality be?
- 3) How do we belong in new urban areas – what has happened to tribalism and chaos? What is 'trust' amidst this new kind of belonging?
- 4) For whom do we build our new urban areas – to whom should they belong? Who is supposed to benefit? What of God's poor?

Sociological

- 5) What is the nature of suburban religion and spirituality?
- 6) What are the pressures and stresses, but also the benefits and opportunities of living in new urban areas? Where do we find points of social energy, connection and celebration? And what is driving that?

Political

- 7) Where is power located within the processes of developing new suburban space and where and how does the church engage with it? How does a voice get heard if it goes against the prevailing assumptions?
- 8) What is the role and identity of local leadership in these quango- and market-developed settlements?
- 9) What is the nature of citizenship in the new urban areas?

Ecclesiological

- 10) What is the relationship between 'liquid' and 'solid' church; i.e. to what extent does the institutional church support/monitor/challenge the necessarily risky experiments in new expressions of church which new suburban areas will require? – (where we are finding that contrary to expectation it is the traditional buildings which are being preferred as centres of sanctuary in opposition to the new)

Research Proposal (which will be included in an appendix)

A three-year properly funded research project into the nature of community, identity and belonging in the new suburbs, with strategic recommendations concerning the future creation of sustainable communities and the churches role in these new post-industrial communities. Underpinning the report will be theological reflection on the fundamental values expressed in the building of new suburbs; for example in the words of Andrew Davey, ‘We might begin by refusing to accept forms of urban development and restructuring based on consumption, the denial of relatedness and the economic value of property and start to tell that different story of grace and gift, of God among us in the neighbour, of the spirit who renews our imaginations to regenerate and enliven as we participate in the transformation of human society.’

The research project would include the following elements.

1) A brief literature review of existing sociological and urban studies material on the phenomenon of the outer suburb (e.g. New Urbanism, Postmetropolis, Edge City etc.) – US, European, but focussing on UK experience

2) The establishment of a longitudinal piece of research that will take place in one of the designated growth areas under the *Sustainable Communities* plan (OPDM, 2003) to fulfil two tasks

- Record the real and felt experiences of living in these areas. How do people sense they are fulfilled or not?
- Map existing forms of urban community and belonging in these areas – e.g. villages, market towns, traditional suburbs, outer housing estates, industrial areas etc
- Map new forms of community belonging and identity as newly built housing and associated infrastructure are constructed alongside these pre-existing communities

3) To write up and evaluate the data gathered according as contributions to new knowledge.

- The usefulness of the concept of sustainability to evaluate and measure what is happening in new suburban areas
- A greater understanding of the social, political and cultural implications of this form of urban development
- Policy recommendations concerning the social development and support of new communities (Government, civil society etc)
- Strategic and theological reflections on emerging patterns of church required to connect with new suburban communities- and to reflect on how the old styles may or may not connect.

The current New Areas Group could continue in an advisory and possibly support/management role in this proposed research because we recognise the necessity of gaining greater insight into this increasingly significant form of urbanisation. We would welcome further advice about refining this proposal and sources of funding that might be available to bring into being.

Bibliography

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