



urban scrawl

News from Nowhere

A future in which our cities are properly planned

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A young harassed planner falls asleep on a train over the Pennines, waking up in Manchester 30 years in the future. Drawing inspiration from William Morris's 1890 utopian novel *News from Nowhere* David Rudlin imagines how a reformed planning system could transform the city.

The hero of our story, a young planner of the name William Guest, was travelling back to Manchester on East Midlands Trains from a meeting of the Planning Officer Society in Nottingham. It had been a good session, full of inspirational presentations about the power of planning to shape development in a city like Nottingham. The problem was the gap that existed between the idealism of those Powerpoints and the prospect of the next morning back in his office covering for two unfilled 'forward' planning posts. There was that pile of hostile submissions from housebuilders and landowners challenging the SHLAA (he never

could quite remember what that stood for). There was a meeting with his fractious planning committee who didn't believe his housing numbers and who were diametrically opposed to the neighbouring district with whom they had a duty to cooperate. Then, of course, there were the 10,000 angry responses from the consultation on the local plan and the very real prospect that it would be found unsound by the inspector in the up-coming examination in public. Trying to cling onto the inspiration of the POS conference he fell into a deep sleep as the train raced onwards into the tunnel under the Pennines.

How long had he been asleep? Certainly when he awoke the train seemed to be travelling faster and rattling a lot less. The countryside flew past as it approached Hazel Grove and the outskirts of Stockport. New housing came into view, increasing in density as the train approached the station with blocks of apartments that he was sure he hadn't seen on his last trip. Maybe it was a different line? Ten minutes later the HS3 train (for that was what the automated announcement called it) glided into the multi modal exchange at Manchester Piccadilly with signs pointing to trams and the newly opened Pic Vic underground line. Walking out of the station the city bustled with people, bikes, autonomous buses and trams, but strangely no cars. Bewildered our hero asked a stranger where he was and was told he was indeed in Manchester. Still confused he asked the date and the answer came 'why 2049 of course'. Somehow 30 years had elapsed since he had left Nottingham.

Seeking out his office the following morning he came across Clara a planner who was now doing his old job. Taking pity on a confused former planning officer, she offers to give him a tour. Hailing a taxi (with a driver) they set off on a trip around Greater Manchester. The conurbation was now home to 4.8 million people having continued its 2% annual growth rate from the early decades of the century. Another 20 years growing at this rate and it would finally fulfil Zipf's Law of Cities which suggests that the second city should be half the size of the capital. Clara explained that the key to achieving this had not been to restrict the growth of London, or even to direct public institutions to invest outside London, as had happened with the BBC and Channel 4. The key had been a national plan that directed transport and other investment not on the basis of what had happened in the past, but on a positive vision of how the country should be. All that had been needed was to increase infrastructure spending

per person in the north to the same as it had been for years in London.

The plan had prioritised the growth of the cities of the Midlands and the North starting with the completion of HS2 to Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield and Leeds with the simultaneous construction of the HS3 link between these cities. Further investments had been made into the transport systems within each city, an expansion of the trams in Manchester and Sheffield, an enlarged underground in Liverpool, and an innovative trolley bus system in Leeds. These transport systems had knitted together the city regions of the north as the Tube integrates London. This meant the secondary towns and smaller cities, from Oldham to Rotherham, Castleford to Birkenhead felt as much part of their cities as Stratford or Clapham felt part of London. Investment in housing and offices had followed as these towns had been integrated into the regional economy. The result was a functioning economic area of 15 million people encompassing towns and cities of the north able to compete with London to the huge benefit of the national economy.

Meanwhile road pricing, that had started with the introduction of low emissions zones in the early 2020s had fundamentally changed the role of cars. Self-driving cars had been banned by all of the cities after it had become clear that safety issues couldn't be resolved and that they made congestion worse. Many people still owned a car (electric of course) that they used to get away for the weekend, but commuting was predominantly done by public transport cycling and walking. The cities had used the decarbonisation of the power grid – that had finally been completed in 2030 – to make themselves carbon neutral and the introduction of new green spaces, often on roofs and walls, had made them net contributors to biodiversity.



Clara and William transferred to a water taxi, heading down the Irwell, canyoned by the towers of Manchester and Salford that William remembered being thrown-up in a brief moment of madness in the late 2010s. As they passed into the Ship Canal, Clara explained that the new spatial planning system had allowed for the much more balanced growth of the conurbation. The inner areas of Manchester and Salford had been developed with mid-density neighbourhoods of housing, apartments and workspace resembling the cities of continental Europe. Higher density nodes, like those he had seen from the train, had been promoted around transport interchanges and local centres. There were still plenty of suburbs, of course, like the one where Clara lived with her family that they would visit later, but the overall structure of the conurbation made much more sense and was far more sustainable.

This had happened as a result of the new planning structure introduced in 2021 following

a series of reports that had highlighted how dysfunctional the system had become. The new system was based on three tiers that had finally given clarity to the planning system as well as rejuvenated the role and status of planners like Clara. The top tier was a National Spatial Plan, the middle was City Region / County Spatial strategies and the third was district-level zonal coding plans, but more of that in a moment.

They had already discussed the impact of the National Spatial Plan on the towns and cities of the north. Clara explained that it has set out a 20 year strategy for growth and, crucially, had included both planning policy, public transport and infrastructure spending. The plan had set minimum numbers of new homes to be built in each area to ensure that national housing targets were met – doing away with the hopelessly optimistic ‘duty to cooperate’ – but planning authorities were able to exceed these minimums if they wished, which all the large cities had done.

After years of squabbling with hundreds of uncoordinated local plans it had been decided in the 2020s that the second planning tier should be at the City Region / County level. This became the level at which strategic spatial planning took place using a model adapted from the Netherlands. Guided by mayors, these city regions and county plans were responsible for setting out a positive vision for the settlements within their area, deciding upon levels of growth, directing investment in transport and infrastructure and allocating land.

These spatial strategies were developed as large scale democratic exercises under the control of mayors. Their role was to allocate land in the most sustainable locations, that could be served by public transport and relate to existing infrastructure. Whether this should be in the form of urban infill, urban extensions or new garden cities had been hotly debated in each of the cities. However once the plans had been approved they became legally binding and were not subject to further consultation. This legislative basis of the plans meant that, in theory, there was no need for green belts because there was no mechanism for development to take place outside the plan allocations. However many areas had found it politically expedient to retain the green belt designation.

The new legislation had incorporated the recommendations of the 2018 Letwin Report to control the way that large-scale allocations were developed. Land owners were expected to pool their interests and sign a legally binding agreement to create mixed schemes and to provide the infrastructure required to serve the new development. If they were unwilling or unable to do this the public sector had the right to acquire, by compulsion, the land at no more than 10 times its agricultural value. The public authorities could then set up development corporations as master developers to coordinate the development of these sites.

Clara explained that this had fundamentally changed the land market and the value of development land. At one point in the 2010s serviced housing land had been trading at 2000% of its agricultural value, but now a piece of agricultural land worth £15-20,000 a hectare was valued at no more than £200,000 per hectare with consent. The price of housing had stabilised as a result and the system meant that the money that had previously got into acquiring the land was being spent on infrastructure and the quality of what was built.

Of course this had hit the share price of some of the big housebuilders but they had survived. The real effect had been on the industry of land agents, planning consultants and lawyers grown fat on the old discretionary, contested planning system. The money that had once been spent buying land at inflated values and the energy that had once been sucked into constant planning arguments had been redirected into creating good places, because that was how the best profits were to be made. The results could be seen as William and Clara travelled along the canal, passing neighbourhoods similar to those that William remembered from presentations on Freiburg and Stockholm at that POS meeting.

Stopping near to the Barton Swing Bridge, an area that William remembered as a sea of car parking around the Trafford Centre, they walked up into one such new neighbourhood. The streets were lined with a variety of housing types, built by different people at different times. Some included commercial uses on the ground floor and low rise apartments gave a little more height around the main junctions. As Clara explained, the crisis on the high street of the late 2010s had caused its owners to rethink the business model of the shopping centre. The grand arcade was still there with plenty of shops, showrooms and leisure uses. But customers now came by public transport

and the owners had capitalised on the value of their huge areas of parking to build a new neighbourhood.

Acting as master developers, the land owners had commissioned a masterplan and then laid out the streets and public spaces while dividing the land into around 5,000 plots. These plots ranged from 5m to 15m in width, the former creating the tight terraced streets at the heart of the scheme where William and Clara were now walking, the latter allowing more suburban homes around the edge. 30% of the plots had been designated for social housing and made available at no cost to the local authority and housing associations. The system that William

remembered, in which the planning authority tried to get developers to build social housing through S106 agreements had long been abandoned as unworkable. Local authorities and housing associations were now once more able to build social and affordable housing directly using low-cost borrowing and subsidy derived from savings in the £24 Billion budget that had previously been spent on Housing Benefit.

Each of the plots came with a set of rules stipulating what it could be used for and what could be built on it – these generally covered no more than a couple of pages. In some places the rules allowed groups of plots to be combined to create ‘lots’ in order to accommodate



larger buildings. Many of the plots had been sold-off individually to households wanting to commission their own home, while others were sold in packages of up to 100 plots to developers. This was how all large scale developments now are done, Clara explained, reinventing a process that had been common up until the invention of the post war planning system.

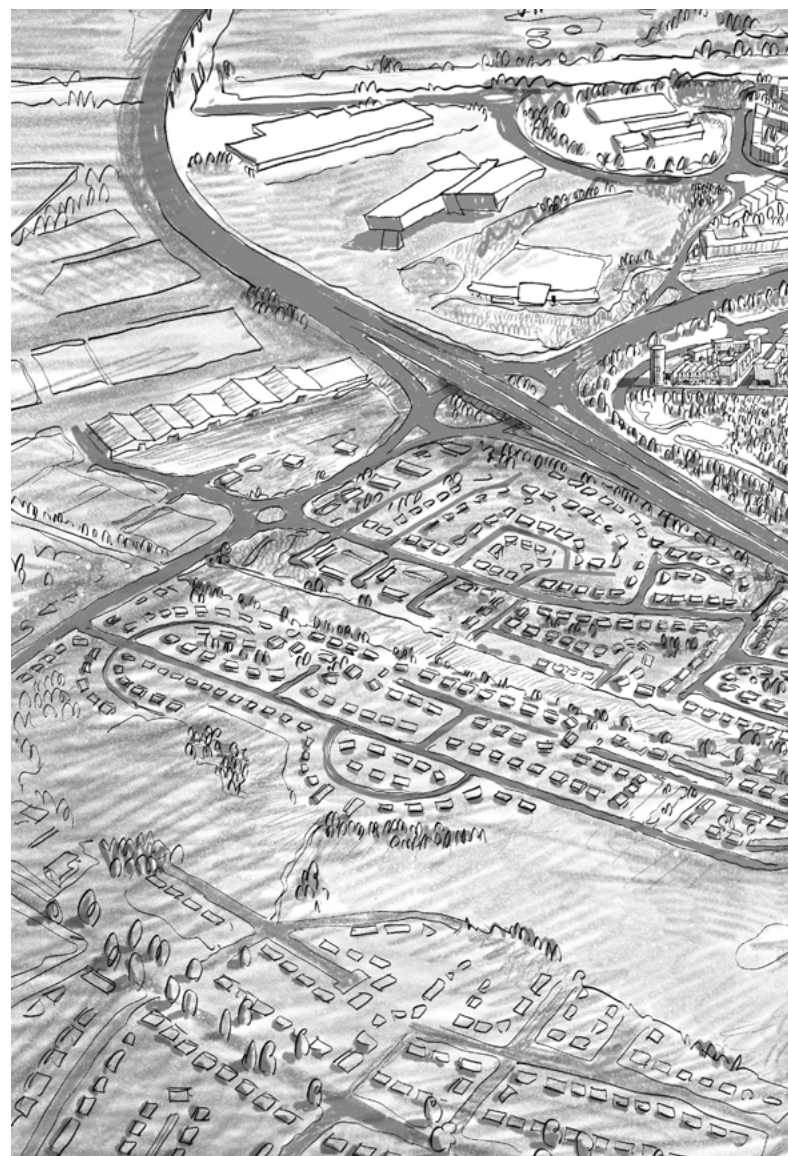
Later that evening Clara invited William to eat with her family. Their home stood at the centre of a large plot, prompting William to wonder how much planners were paid nowadays? The family had in fact bought two plots some years ago, the second not being developable because the plot ratio for this particular block had already been met. Surely, William asked, they could have argued the case for a house to be built on the other plot? But he was told that the planners had no discretion in the zonal, code based system and there was no right of appeal. This did however have the advantage of speeding up the planning process. The family had bought a set of standard plans for their home which had been pre-approved by the planning authority. Clara had therefore just needed a single stamp to confirm that the plans were in line with both the zoning ordinance and building regulations, a process that had taken only a few days.

This, Clara explained was how all planning now worked. The local plan included four zones, covering different levels of density. The zoning ordinance for each zone set out precisely what was allowed. This included a plot ratio setting out the amount of floor area allowable per hectare, a defined building line, rules about height and the party wall condition, and a few rules about use.

So the density zone around the local district centre specified a plot ratio of no more than 3:1 (three times as much floor area as the site area), a maximum height of six storeys, re-

quired party walls on both sides of the plot and a requirement to include more than one use. The most suburban zone by contrast set a plot ratio of 1:4 (floor area of no more than a quarter of the site area), did not allow party walls, set a building line for the front of the house and a minimum privacy distance for the back while allowing but not requiring other uses.

Each set of rules established a specific urban form that had been gradually developing in the 25 years since the system has been introduced. The high density zones had emerged as a set of urban streets with 4-6 storey apartment buildings with ground floor commercial uses. The suburban zones consisted of detached two storey houses set within gardens. The point was



that the same code based system could produce very different types of place depending on how the rules were calibrated. In some places, particularly conservation areas there were a lot of rules, while elsewhere councils had experimented with removing rules altogether. The latter had however tended not to be successful because people were unwilling to invest if they didn't know what their neighbours might build.

Relaxing after a pleasant meal William mused on the motives that had caused him to become a planner, the desire to create successful, equitable, sustainable places, the aim of working with the market rather than always being the one to say no, the idea that the plans that he

created might actually be realised. But it was late and he said that he really should be getting back. Stepping into the cold evening air, a fog already forming, he hailed a passing taxi. As it travelled back into the city the fog thickened until the passing city streets disappeared behind a white veil. On arrival back at his house he noticed his old car in the drive. Waking up the following morning from a deep sleep the newspaper at breakfast told him that he was back in 2019. Going back to the office was going to be difficult but nevertheless there was a spring in his step as some of his utopian zeal had returned.

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URBED+ May 2020



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May 2020

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