



Porter, E. and Hunt, D. (2005) *Birmingham's Eastside story: making steps towards sustainability?* *Local Environment*, 10 (5). pp. 525-542.  
ISSN 1354-9839

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/25334/>

Deposited on: 25 June 2010

# **Birmingham's Eastside story: Making steps towards sustainability?**

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## **Abstract**

Sustainability has come to play a dominant discursive role in the UK planning system, particularly relating to urban regeneration. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the role that sustainability plays in a major regeneration programme, known as Eastside, currently underway in Birmingham, the UK. That this £6 billion redevelopment is now widely talked about by such key players as Birmingham City Council and the Regional Development Agency, Advantage West Midlands, as having a central sustainability agenda points to the growing importance of the ideal of sustainability in planning and regeneration agendas. In this paper, we investigate in detail how and why sustainability has become part of the planning discourse for Eastside and critically evaluate what impact, if any, this is having on public policy decision-making.

## **Introduction**

Defining and 'achieving' sustainable urban development has become a central tenet of the UK planning system through the *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act* (2004). Clause 39 of this Act now requires planning authorities to discharge their function 'with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development'. The centrality of sustainability to public policy agendas is driven in the UK by the Government's 1999 strategy *A Better Quality of Life*, which set out four principles for sustainable development that encapsulate economic, environmental and social goals. Yet within this legal and policy context, planning authorities must grapple with the inherent difficulties of the concept of sustainability. In the UK, various policy frameworks attempt to achieve this. The *Sustainable Communities Plan* of 2003 seeks to coordinate government efforts toward achieving sustainability in all parts of the UK, and the recent Egan Report reviewed the skills and organisational structures required to deliver this plan (ODPM, 2004). The UK Sustainable Development Commission is actively working on key planning and sustainability issues including how to mainstream sustainability into regeneration programmes (Sustainable Development Commission, 2003). The multi-disciplinary nature of sustainability defies bureaucratic boundaries and jurisdictions, and is intrinsically difficult to define and measure. This raises questions about what happens when sustainability is 'adopted' as a guiding principle within urban development. How is sustainability defined within urban policy agendas? Where and how does sustainability have an impact on actual decision-making? And does the definition of sustainability have an impact on decision-making and ultimately what is built?

It is with these questions in mind that we approach our case study of Eastside—a major regeneration programme underway in Birmingham, in the UK. Birmingham City Council's (BCC) wider public policy agenda, and specific Eastside strategies, are couched in sustainability terms, such that Eastside is claimed by the Council to herald an exemplar for sustainable urban living in the UK. Our paper examines this claim by evaluating how and why sustainability became part of the Eastside agenda, and what impact this is having on actual planning decisions. Our research programme is in its

infancy, and as such we focus predominantly on documentary evidence about the area's development and planning frameworks, with some limited reference to exploratory interviews with planning and development staff of BCC. First, we provide some introductory background to Eastside before setting out a conceptual framework for understanding sustainable development and the policy context within which this operates in UK planning systems. We then evaluate three particular development sites in Eastside in the light of this and conclude some possibilities for genuine sustainable development in Eastside.

### **Birmingham's Eastside**

Totalling 130 hectares (420 acres), Eastside constitutes a large regeneration programme adjacent to the newly developed BullRing retail complex in Birmingham city centre (see Figure 1). The predominantly industrial area has few residents and is characterised by its poor local environment (i.e., vacant and derelict sites, heavy manufacturing, see Figure 2 and 3), its heritage (e.g., Digbeth/Deritend conservation precincts), the River Rea and an extensive canal system.

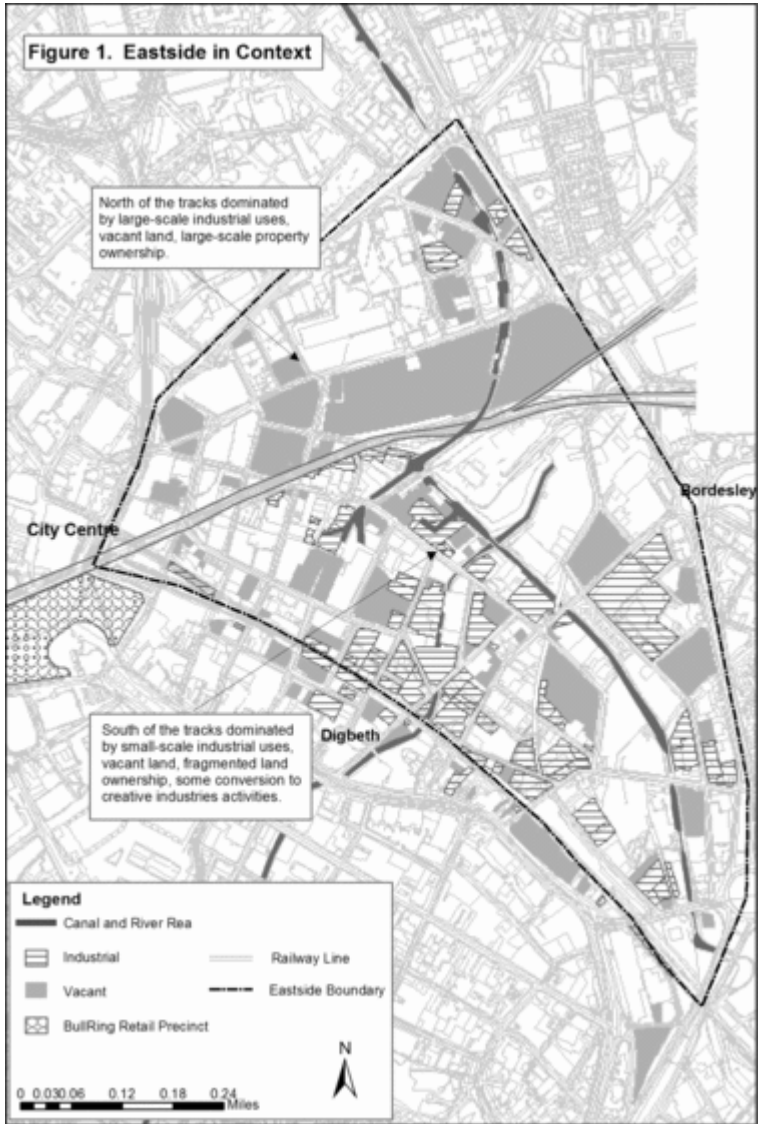


Figure 1. Eastside in context



Figure 2. Disused buildings in Grosvenor Street



Figure 3. Aggregates crushing in Fazeley Street

In the 1960s, a time when car manufacturing was crucial to the city-region economy, city engineers built two raised ring roads circling the city centre, to provide a main arterial link. The towering roadways, known as the 'concrete collar', dominated the skyline and prevented pedestrian access and the spatial spread of investment from the city centre into its surrounding region. Eastside became physically, economically and socially isolated from the city centre by the Masshouse Circus and ring road—a part of the elevated road structure that then defined the south-eastern boundary of the city centre.

Formerly known as the Digbeth Millennium Quarter, Eastside is now the focus of regeneration attention under Birmingham City Council's urban renaissance agenda, which began in the western end of the city with the International Convention Centre and Brindley Place (Birmingham City Council, 1995). Like the western end before it, regeneration of Eastside has begun with the breaking of the eastern 'concrete collar'. Development is at very early stages and little new development has actually commenced to date, with the exception of Millennium Point which was completed in 2001.

The *Digbeth Millennium Quarter Plan*, adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) in 1996, focused on the area as a possible 'expression of a rediscovered belief in urbanism' (Birmingham City Council, 1995) and sought to encourage city living and mixed use development to revitalise this declining industrial area with an emphasis on the improvement of more 'environmentally friendly transportation modes than the car, particularly buses and bicycles' (ibid., p. 13). Sustainable development as an overarching principle was nowhere mentioned. Yet Birmingham City Council had been operating under broad sustainability principles since at least 1993 when it had established a Sustainability Forum in response to LA21. Since then, it has adopted a *Sustainability Strategy and Action Plan* (Birmingham City Council, 2000) and recent changes to the *Birmingham Unitary Development Plan* require that all planning applications are subjected to a sustainability appraisal. When and why, then, did sustainability become part of the agenda for Eastside, and to what extent can we see sustainability objectives driving the regeneration programme? Is the idea of the 'sustainability quarter' more than just rhetoric and how does Eastside intend to translate sustainable development principles into practice? Before we investigate these questions in detail, we establish some broad conceptual parameters for sustainable development, and set out the wider UK policy context.

## **Conceptualising sustainable development**

Since the publication of the Brundtland report in 1987, and then the development of Agenda 21 through the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, sustainable development has become an accepted, though contested, aspect of urban development. Whilst most commentators continue to draw on Brundtland's original definition of 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), interpretations of that definition, and its implementation, are the subject of ongoing debate. In this section, we draw out some of the key concepts of sustainable development in order to reflect more critically upon the application of its

principles in our case study. These include the multi-dimensionality of sustainability and some of the key tools and attitudes required in order to achieve a more sustainable urban society. We focus specifically on urban sustainability, and are of course writing from and about an industrialised western city, with all the privileges that pertain.

Sustainable development is a broad concept and focuses centrally on human needs, which by definition must always be concerned with the protection and enhancement of natural resources. Brundtland (as quoted in Moffatt, 1995, p. 27) provided a more detailed definition of sustainable development as requiring four aspects:

- elimination of poverty and deprivation;
- conservation and enhancement of natural resource base;
- broadening of the concept of development to include social and cultural development; and
- unification of economics and ecology in decision-making.

Thus, sustainable development has to be seen as having environmental, social and economic dimensions, such that its achievement sits at the intersection between ecological conservation, social justice, and economic growth. Whilst the agenda of sustainable development arose out of a growing concern about environmental degradation, it is not of itself narrowly concerned with the environment alone. Indeed, this would be 'an impediment to solving the environmental problems of the world ... [because they] must be traced to dominant modes of production, consumption and reproduction' (Haughton, 1994, p. 22).

Haughton and others thus argue that the key barrier to achieving sustainability is rooted within basic western philosophies of development and progress, and the manner by which the contemporary global economy is organised (Haughton, 1994; Moffatt, 1995; Reid, 1995; Rydin, 1995; Owens & Cowell, 2002). Definitions of 'development', according to those philosophies and the market system they underpin, involves a constant drive for profit and the generation of wealth. 'Sustainable development' as defined by Brundtland, moves away from the pursuit of profit because of the negative environmental, social and economic costs it entails. Achieving sustainable development requires a redefinition of growth, development, cost and quality of life (Rookwood, 1993; Reid, 1995) necessitating the stretching of philosophies that currently determine how sustainability objectives are identified, studied, and monitored (Owens & Cowell, 2002; Rydin, 2002). For example, institutional financial structures should be arranged to suit long-term sustainability objectives rather than financial years or the vagaries of political administrations (Rookwood, 1993; Bennett, 1995; Rydin, 2002).

This philosophical work is inherently political containing a series of value choices about what, in a given situation, is to be defined as sustainable. In any contest about meanings and outcomes in public policy decision-making, power relations are inherent, making the question of process and deliberation about sustainability all the more important (see Redclift, 1987; Rydin, 1995; Owens & Cowell, 2002). Public participation, the vitality of discursive democracy, and community empowerment are fundamental requirements for any sustainability objective as they open up a public debate about those value choices and must, by their design, attempt to ameliorate

inherent unequal power relations (Blowers, 1993; Reid, 1995; Rydin, 2002; Owens & Cowell, 2002; Beauregard, 2003).

At a more logistical level, sustainable development requires a multi-sectoral approach, so that the standard bureaucratic and disciplinary boundaries so entrenched within institutions and organisations are breached and more holistic solutions can be found (Rydin, 2002). In addition to a process that entails wide and genuine public participation, other technical tools are required for sustainability (for example, measuring sustainability objectives requires the development of sound indices and then ongoing data collection to monitor implementation and effect; see Rookwood, 1993; Bell, 1999; Rydin, 2002).

Sustainable development, then, is a complex concept and one that is particularly difficult to implement in policy terms. How, then, does sustainability become translated into actual strategic directions and urban initiatives? The next section sets out the context of sustainable development policy in the UK, particularly as it relates to the planning system.

### **Planning and sustainable development in the UK**

In the UK, the planning system has come to be seen as the 'key instrument for delivering a more sustainable society' (Owens & Cowell, 2002, p. 4). Far from a new concept, the idea of more harmonious relations between humans, their settlements and the natural environment, has long been the mainstay concern of planning. The garden cities movement and the work of early town planners such as Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford were all concerned with mitigating the negative social and environmental effects of rapid urbanisation in the industrial age (see Blowers, 1993; Hall, 1993).

The driving force behind this move to centralise planning in the sustainable development process is the UK Government's strategy for sustainable development, *A Better Quality of Life*, released in 1999 (UK Government, 1999), and the establishment of the UK Sustainable Development Commission. The Commission is tasked with promoting the idea of sustainable development, and how to achieve it, across all business and public policy sectors. The Government's definition of sustainability is based on four principles (UK Government, 1999):

- Maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment.
- Social progress which recognises the needs of everyone.
- Effective protection of the environment.
- Prudent use of natural resources.

Planning's centrality to the task of achieving sustainable development is welcome and positive in that it calls attention to planning's integral role in producing more environmentally, socially and economically just city-regions (Owens & Cowell, 2002). The *Sustainable Communities Plan*, released by the UK Government in 2003 sets out the broad objectives for achieving sustainable development within UK cities and regions and is to be delivered through the planning system. The new *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act* (2004) now requires planning authorities to directly contribute to sustainable development through their planning functions.



There is now a proliferation of ideas, guides and practices about the implementation of urban sustainability through planning policy and practice. Major themes include the geography of urban development (for example, greenfield versus brownfield sites), transport issues (encouraging public transport, cycling or walking), urban form and design (the 'footprint' approach and the emphasis on mixed use developments), and the incorporation of sustainable technologies into building design (see Breheny, 1993; Bennett, 1995; Rydin, 1995; Counsell, 1998; Owens & Cowell, 2002). In the West Midlands, for example, the regional Sustainability Strategy sets objectives for reducing car travel, sourcing local products and services, household waste recycling, use of brownfield sites for new housing development and incorporating grey water systems in new buildings (Government Office West Midlands, 2000).

Despite this strengthening push by central government to centralise sustainability as a principle in urban development, studies have revealed a tendency for strongly environment-led or social equity policies to encounter major obstacles in 'reconciling their aspirations with what seem to be inexorable trends in production, consumption and mobility' (Owens & Cowell, 2002, p. 24). The application of sustainability principles in local urban policy agendas shows great spatial variation around the UK, and growth-restrictive policies rarely survive (Counsell, 1998; Owens & Cowell, 2002). What, then, is the prospect for Birmingham's Eastside? The next section narrates the emerging sustainability agenda for Eastside.

### **Planning Eastside: Developing the sustainability agenda**

In the early days of strategic thinking about the future of Eastside, sustainability was neither a central, nor ancillary, feature. In late 1998, the senior executive of Birmingham City Council proposed that a small development team be arranged within the organisational structure to progress the implementation of the *Digbeth Millennium Quarter Plan*. This team were charged with a series of primary functions (i.e. coordinate development and infrastructure provision, explore scope for partnerships, broker rapid development, promote and market Eastside, consult with local interests, attract investment, and arrange for the acquisition and disposal of land and the relocation of industrial interests, see Birmingham City Council, 1999), none of which included the responsibility for delivering *sustainable* development in Eastside.

Millennium Point, one of the largest Millennium projects built outside London (partly funded by the ERDF) opened its doors to Eastside in 2001, and was one of the first key projects to kick-start investment in Eastside. Built as a landmark for the city it houses various science and educational facilities, but unfortunately it does not house the 'sustainability features' (i.e., sustainable building technologies) of early designs. The potential for an educational 'sustainable demonstrator' project was lost due to budget constraints (Economic Development Officer, personal communication, 22 June 2004).

Sustainability became part of the planning 'talk' around Eastside when Council submitted a bid outlining Eastside as 'Birmingham's first "Sustainability Quarter"' (Ecotec, n.d., p. 5) for funding to the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Upon completion of the Eastside Master Plan by HOK Consultants, Council claimed

that the Eastside vision 'has the potential to ensure a dynamic and sustainable future for Birmingham in relation to other competing cities throughout Europe' ([www.Eastside.co.uk](http://www.Eastside.co.uk)).

Why this shift in policy agenda? The incorporation of sustainability objectives in Eastside's planning framework are primarily a response to the New Objective 2 ERDF programme for 2000–2006, which included consideration of environmental sustainability as a requirement for project funding. In line with this agenda, Council and partners'1 vision for Eastside was for 'a unique and dynamic quarter within a World Class City in the 21st Century. It will provide a catalyst for new sustainable regional growth with an inclusive employment agenda focused on the themes of technology, heritage and learning' (Ecotec, [n.d.](#), p. 33). The particular sustainability objectives that are laid out in the bid (which was successful in securing over £50 m of funds) focus particularly on environmental sustainability aspects, in line with the Objective 2 requirements. They include: land remediation; promotion of energy and water efficient design; energy consumption strategy; measures to promote sustainability in business and building such as local sourcing and recruitment, carbon free development, use of waste materials etc; measures to promote the natural environment and encourage wildlife in the new city park; waste reduction and recycling schemes (Ecotec, [n.d.](#)). The ERDF funds were crucial to a number of key infrastructure projects (i.e. removal of Masshouse Circus and refashioning the inner ring road), land acquisitions, the refurbishment of Moor Street Station, and the proposed refurbishment of Curzon Street Station.

Three specific mechanisms have been adopted by Birmingham City Council that incorporate sustainability objectives for Eastside. First is the *Eastside Development Framework* (EDF), which is now the primary strategic planning document for Eastside. In the EDF, Council recognised the 'growing enthusiasm for 'city living' with the potential for sustainable communities living and working in the heart of the city' (Birmingham City Council, 2001, p. 1). The plan seeks to encourage 'sustainable developments incorporating innovative fuel technologies and materials' (*ibid.*, p. 11). Sustainability also became directly linked with the three new driving 'themes' for development in Eastside—learning, heritage and technology—by claiming for example that 'the heritage of [Digbeth/Deritend/Warwick Bar] provides the opportunity for innovative and sustainable economic regeneration through conservation' (*ibid.*, p. 14).

The second important strategic document governing development in Eastside is the *Eastside Design and Movement Framework* (EDMF) (Birmingham City Council, 2003a), which at present holds draft Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) status. The Framework is essentially a transport plan setting out key principles for how people and activities will move around and interact within the area, and is primarily focused on urban design. The key principles include creating a sense of place, and a 'high quality [and] sustainable street environment'. The primary emphasis is on encouraging 'sustainable transport' (defined as walking, cycling and public transport) wherever possible and ensuring a lower priority for through-traffic and car parking. A separate Sustainability Strategy Action Plan for Eastside is currently being developed by GHK consultants, which will give further detail on implementing the sustainability objectives of the EDMF.

The mechanism with perhaps the greatest potential to push for sustainability in Eastside is derived from Council's partnership with Groundwork Birmingham<sup>2</sup> in the original ERDF bid. Groundwork Birmingham were nominated as the key agency to lead on sustainability for Eastside, initially through the development of a 'sustainability vision' (Groundwork Birmingham & Friends of the Earth, 2002). This document was developed through the collaboration of 19 different organisations in Birmingham. Two sustainability advisors were then appointed (and seconded to Council's Eastside team) to provide the technical skills to implement the vision, and a wider advisory group called the Eastside Sustainability Advisory Group (ESAG) was established.<sup>3</sup> This mechanism currently provides the widest form of representation to Council about sustainability objectives and their implementation, and is broadly supported by Council through indirect means such as secretarial support and meeting space. ESAG has not, however, been regularly consulted by Council on particular planning applications or even informed of development events as they occur in Eastside, there being no formal mechanism for consultation.

In addition to these overarching strategic instruments are the planning applications and development approvals process for specific sites in Eastside. In the following section we focus on three sites, investigating briefly the nature of the planning approvals process, the proposed schemes, and the way sustainability has entered the decision-making arena in each instance. The three sites, as shown on Figure 4 below, are:

1. Masshouse.
2. City Park Gate.
3. The Library and City Park.

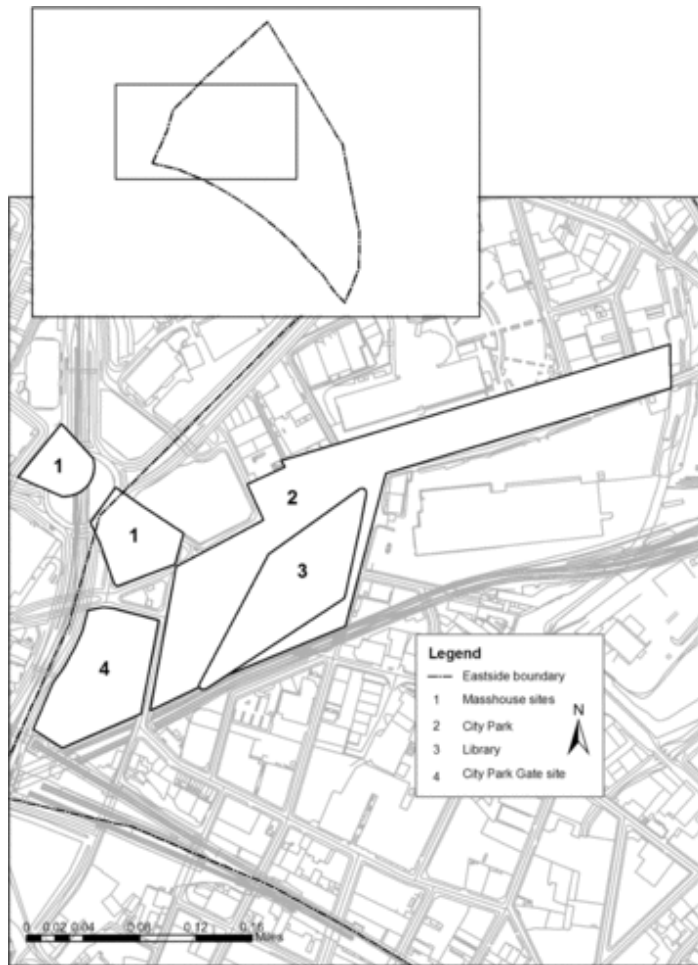


Figure 4. Location of three development sites within Eastside

### Masshouse

The key to revitalising investment and interest in Eastside was the removal of Masshouse Circus, a physical and perceptual barrier between the city centre and Eastside. Through the removal of the circus two new development sites were created and approximately 95% of the structure was recycled (i.e. concrete was crushed and reused as hardcore for new roads and metal reinforcing bars were removed and recycled).

The planning framework for these sites provide for a mixed use development including offices, retail, leisure, hotel and residential uses (GVA Grimley, 2002). David McLean's Developers were selected as the developer for these sites in 2002 and submitted detailed plans. The details of this selection process do not lie within the public realm, but the plans dedicate three pages to a sustainable strategy based on the Government's definition of sustainable development (UK Government, 1999). At Masshouse, sustainability will be delivered through building design and use of sustainable building materials, as well as the mixed-use nature of the development, as shown below in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Masshouse masterplan sustainability appraisal**

## **Economic**

- Economic growth and employment will be stimulated by new accommodation within the proposal

## **Social**

- Mixed use with residential component to encourage a busy place diverse in its social composition and activity
- Physically planned to encourage a vibrant public realm, movement and interaction between buildings
- High quality materials, signage and lighting will animate the space and increase accessibility, orientation and safety
- Links to public transport emphasised and car parking minimised

## **Environmental**

- Sustainable energy
- Natural ventilation, solar shading and daylighting
- Reduce energy demands by maximising solar potential
- Reduce impact of the development on the environment during and after construction
- Exceed relevant standards

## **City Park Gate**

Outline planning permission for this site was granted in August 2002, again proposing a mixed-use scheme. The selection process for developers was conducted in two stages and showed a greater commitment to transparency through the publication of the selection procedure. A first stage considered the proposals weighted by their design and sustainability elements (50%), financial elements (30%), and their deliverability (20%) (Birmingham City Council, 2003b). The sustainability criteria specifically required developers to consider the longevity of buildings; encourage sustainable transport; use renewable materials; develop sustainable waste strategies; and consider nature conservation and the maintenance/creation of urban wildlife habitats. Similarly, many of the design elements incorporated sustainability measures such as low energy systems, heat recovery, grey water recycling, combined heat and power generation, and the use of photovoltaic cells. A second stage considered purely the financial aspects of each bid.

Countryside Properties, a company already recognised for existing sustainable development projects such as Greenwich Millennium Village, were selected as the preferred developer in 2003. Their proposed scheme consists of residential units (a proportion of which are to be affordable), offices, retail (including a foodstore, café and ancillary retail units) and 650 underground car parking spaces.

## **The library and City Park**

Birmingham's central library is currently situated at the heart of the city centre, and attracts approximately 5000 visitors each day. A new library has been proposed for development in Eastside, largely due to pressures on infrastructure and capacity at the existing library, unfortunately there is currently no funding, although this could be raised through the sale of the current library site at Paradise Circus, a source of some local controversy. User data for the current library indicates a high level of accessibility and inclusivity, where 30% of library users are from black and ethnic communities, 13% have a disability, and 10% are unemployed (Birmingham City Council, 2004). Outline planning permission has been granted for a new library to be developed in Eastside (GVA Grimley, 2003). The library is marked as a potential sustainability demonstration project by incorporating renewable energy consumption and other sustainable building technologies and the City Park is marked as a tourist and recreation resource for the city. The planning applications and permissions do not address the social and cultural inclusivity of the new library, but are instead limited to its environmental or physical sustainability aspects. Whilst the application does state that the development will 'apply state of the art practices for environmental, economic and social sustainability' (GVA Grimley Outline Planning Application, 2003) these practices are not given any concrete form.

### **Evaluating sustainability in Eastside**

Sustainability became part of the planning agenda for Eastside during the process of Council bidding for funds from the ERDF, which required Council to address environmental aspects. As such, sustainability in Eastside can be seen as opportunistic, driven by the urgent need for funds to achieve the necessary but expensive physical infrastructure changes to a city radically hampered by past decisions. There have, however, been some shifts in thinking and approach as plans have progressed, as the establishment of ESAG and the significant weighting of sustainability objectives in the selection of developers for City Park Gate indicate. Whilst there remain barriers to achieving the application of these principles, much good work is being undertaken to raise the profile of such technologies and their wider economic and environmental benefits.

Whilst the City Park Gate scheme shows some evidence of an impact on actual decision-making outcomes, this has yet to filter through into mainstream planning decisions in Eastside. An initial review of advice given to Council's planning office by the Groundwork Sustainability Advisors indicates that this advice (even where concrete practical changes were suggested) had no impact on any single planning decision. Thus, the language of sustainability in policy rhetoric does not as yet translate into actual built-form decisions in Eastside.

The proposed schemes for Eastside focus almost entirely on environmental dimensions of sustainability, and in particular those that can be delivered through the new use of existing technologies. This focus is perhaps due to the relative ease with which these can be both conceptualised and made operational. Yet the approach entails a 'bolting on' of a range of environmental technology applications to standard development schemes to achieve measures of sustainability which were relatively limited in the first place. The specific focus on environmental aspects of sustainability, whilst welcome, tends to hide other crucial elements and linkages and fails on two important counts.

First, the operationalisation of sustainability objectives tend to be reduced to a range of design elements for the physical environment. These include the provision of cycle paths and accessible public transport; design of open space to encourage pedestrian thoroughfare; design of buildings along community safety guidelines (eyes on the street etc); zoning for mixed use development to encourage use of space at different times of the day and night (the 24 hour city idea); and incorporating sustainable technologies into building design (such as grey water recycling, solar panels, and green roofs). All of these aspects are commendable, and are a step forward in thinking about the shape and form of cities, Eastside especially. None of them on their own, however, can achieve 'sustainability', if the broader conceptual debate on sustainability is properly understood.

Design-led solutions, whilst important, are both physically deterministic and tend to centre on expert or technical-led responses to urban problems. The application of this expertise and technology tends to reduce the built form to an assemblage of physical elements, and misses what else is important about the city neighbourhood—its meaning, place, context, history. It profoundly neglects the city of memory, desire, and spirit (Sandercock, 1998, 2004). The assumption that by producing 'better' (cleaner, greener, more accessible) urban spaces we can produce a sustainable society seems inherently environmentally deterministic. It suggests that urban design can of itself lead us out of social ills and environmental degradation 'independently of wider cultural, economic and social structures and dynamics' (Haughton, 1994, p. 107), a concept critics consider to be at the very least 'misplaced'.

Second, the translation of sustainable development concepts into planning instruments, both in Eastside and in other UK cases, misses the most crucial element of all—that of process. Much of the conceptual work available about sustainable development (despite its breadth and diversity) shows that without genuine public debate and participation, devolution of decision-making, and empowerment of communities (whomever they may be), sustainable development simply cannot be achieved. Fundamentally, this is because implementing sustainability requires making decisions about what is 'right' or 'good' (Owens & Cowell, 2002), and as such is a moral or ethical decision (Reid, 1995).

Most of the Eastside planning instruments are dominated by glossy brochures produced by consultants and developers. There is considerable lack of transparency in the processes for selecting developers and deciding the content and composition of individual schemes, outside of the standard planning methods of advertising a development proposal and receiving submissions. There is no coherent attempt to engender public debate about Eastside—what it means and who it means what to, what sustainability itself means and how it might be realised through redevelopment, nor about what (and who) is to be displaced and the values associated with those decisions.

Technology and scientific rationality can help us understand what is possible (what could be) and the mechanisms to implement it, but it cannot help us decide what *should* be. These are ethical principles that must be determined democratically, with proper and engaged public participation and debate about what sustainable development means and how it can be achieved in the particular temporal/spatial

context of a city-region. Sustainability policies without accompanying democratic processes are ultimately meaningless.

Yet Eastside is a predominantly non-residential area, like so many brownfield areas now the focus for development to achieve government targets of 60% new housing on previously used urban land. Who is the constituency for participation and consultation on sustainability issues in these areas? How is the displacement of older uses with an entire new community to be democratically managed? Such questions raise unique challenges for local authorities. We believe that in the case of Eastside, this challenge represents an opportunity to rethink how large regeneration programmes can be inclusive of a wide range of constituent voices and to build a genuine dialogue between surrounding neighbourhoods, existing businesses, and future residents. However, in the case of Eastside, this opportunity is being missed. Frequently, the rhetoric about public participation concludes with 'nobody lives there', which is often taken as an excuse for lack of initiatives to build genuine public dialogue. If such crucial questions about the definition of an Eastside constituency could be rethought outside standardised planning consultation processes, a more genuine public debate and engagement about sustainable development in Eastside might ensue.

### **Birmingham—from motor city to eco-city?**

The translation of sustainability principles into Eastside planning policies is a re-elaboration of sustainable development 'to accommodate familiar planning issues of amenity, townscape and culture, [which] in effect become part of a more generalised concern to maintain and enhance the quality of life' (Owens & Cowell, 2002, p. 20). Thus, sustainable development has become redefined according to that thinking which currently dominates the planning paradigm in the UK—the renaissance of urban areas, a re-emergence of city living, an interest in good urban design and quality public space, and regeneration of what are seen as 'deprived' communities or neighbourhoods. What results is a 'rhetoric plus business as usual' approach to sustainability within planning (Counsell, 1998, p. 177).

The dominance of property rights, and an overarching concern with land-use and design remain entrenched in the UK planning system, and in Eastside in particular, thus limiting the impact of broader sustainability principles. Whilst planning theorists over many years have developed inspiring ways of thinking about planning as a practice that can help reshape and reimagine the places in which we live—the material and spiritual quality of those places (see Friedmann, 1987; Friedmann, 1992; Healey, 1997; Sandercock, 1998; Sandercock, 2004)—in practice, planning remains a system and profession directed toward the facilitation of development. Dominated by the operation of property rights and an overarching desire to facilitate growth and development, the planning system is often limited to blunt regulatory and administrative tools. Further, as a profession, planning remains rooted in epistemological and ontological philosophies that value growth, the scientific knowledge of the expert, rationalist responses to urban problems, all underpinned by a confidence that the planner is and can act in the public interest (Sandercock, 1998). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the overarching and complex ideas of sustainable development are simplified within planning instruments to statements about design and urban amenity in a context of economic growth.



Eastside represents a key opportunity in the renaissance of Birmingham from a city symbolically and materially dominated by the motor vehicle to one that embraces the environmental, socio-cultural and economic sensitivities of place. As a place it has the potential to demonstrate the challenges and rewards of embarking on the sustainability journey—one that must, we hope, hold untold and unforeseen benefits for current and future generations. Yet the current approach of reducing the objectives of sustainable development to physically determined urban and building design solutions suggests that this opportunity will be missed.

Some significant changes would be required in thinking, behaviour and approach to realise the opportunity of Eastside. These would include engendering a genuine process of public debate, participation and empowerment; complementing scientific and technical expertise with local knowledge, nous, ideas and emotions; shifting the conceptual boundaries of Eastside's current masterplan to properly attend to wider socio-cultural and economic questions and dilemmas; and stretching the objective for Eastside beyond the 'delivery of an urban regeneration programme' toward a reimagining of city spaces and city lives. Commitment to a reimagining of Eastside in these terms might set us on a pathway toward genuine sustainable development.

## Notes

[1] These include AWM, Aston University, Birmingham Technology Ltd, BVSC, British Waterways Board, Cheapside Business Group, Employment Service, Groundwork Birmingham, LSC, Millenium Point, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, UCE (as listed in Ecotec, n.d., p. 31).

[2] A national environmental charity with regional offices around the UK.

[3] The authors are members of ESAG.

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