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Analysing Trends in the Design of Cities: Family Housing in the UK

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As a planner and an urbanist I see the world through a zoom lens. I am always 'zooming out' to the big view where we are looking at cities as a whole and then 'zooming in' to see the fine detail. That is a very important mental trick when you have a topic like house and home, because, of course, our house is our home. It is the dwelling, with its routines, its furnishings and its meals. However, the home is much more than that. If we zoom outwards from the home, from the house, we first have what we call the curtilage of the house, or the immediate surroundings: the garden, the balcony, the outhouses, the sheds, the pathways, the immediate approach to the house, etc. If we zoom out further, we see the setting of the house: the street, the public realm, the local places, the next door neighbours, the next door neighbours of the next door neighbours etc. You see a house's address. When asked what their address is, people do not say 'my house', they give a street name. That is how we define ourselves in terms of where we live. Beyond that we live in neighbourhoods. We live in localities that have clusters of shops, a church, clubs, swimming pools and so on. Zooming out farther again, we have the town itself, the identity of the town itself: its football team, its distinctive voices, how the people speak, how they cook, the wine, the beer, the specialities, and the landscape of the town. We are at home on all of these levels and when we travel, we have a sense of coming home long before we turn the key at the front door.

We can measure the success of a home by two features of family life. The first might be the obvious measure, which is the point at which the family members come together with their feet under the same table. This is the legal definition of a household in Britain. The other measure is that of dispersal, that is, the extent to which the members of the family go out, spread, ray off into the community and form part of that larger home which is the neighbourhood and the town. Planners and designers have always been aware of this important relationship between the family, the home and the bigger picture. The focus, however, has shifted over the years, and because buildings last so much longer than people, we can see the legacy of these changing ideas about the built environment around us.

I would like to look very briefly at some of these phases with a special focus on the British experience. In the nineteenth century, there was a period of rapid urbanisation where the population in London rose from 1 to 5 million. Overcrowding, packing, and incredibly high densities became serious issues. Barcelona, surrounded by its walls, had densities of about 2,000 people per square kilometre if not more. Every available cubic inch of space was occupied however dark, damp or unsanitary. That reflected in the statistics of disease. The first response to that in the nineteenth century was to standardise the units and to impose standards for buildings, room spaces, and ventilation. In the late nineteenth century, we see a move towards more regular streets all over Europe as governments stepped into the market and ensured basic standards of space for families.

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In the early twentieth century, the focus shifted from the physical minimum of space to higher requirements such as the need for greenery and green space, the need for neighbourhood identity, etc. There emerged what was called the Garden City Movement, which produced patterns of housing that provided room sizes that were adequate, but also aimed to provide gardens and more of a sense of neighbourhood identity by breaking from the rigid grid of streets. That approach developed in the mid-twentieth century to an approach to planning that was very much based on neighbourhood design. Planners became very preoccupied with creating neighbourhood 'cells' in which families would come together around their neighbourhood facilities. They wrapped these cells in green space, so that landscape became the defining feature of these separate units of accommodation. If we look at a map of our cities, most European countries, definitely in Britain but also in North America, the typical pattern is a cellular pattern of dispersed development in which the units and the estates, are defined by a road network and separating green space. This was the orthodox planning model for most of the twentieth century, but towards the late twentieth century we find a shift in attitudes, a disillusion with this approach to the building of the city because of its low density, its tendency to disperse, and because of its lack of urban unity. Furthermore, these residential cells are designed around the motor car so that the mother, for example, is reduced to the role of a taxi driver and the family spends much of its time being ferried around to the school, to the shop, to the offices, to the swimming pool, etc. Everything is dispersed and disconnected. Besides, children cannot really get out of the house because these landscapes are not supervised and instead of liberating people and bringing them closer to nature, in many cities they became landscapes of fear and places people try to avoid. It is a very sad story.

The next step is what we call a new urbanism, a return to the concept of urbanism. This is, again, a general pattern that we find internationally. We find *El Nuevo Urbanismo* in Spain as much as we find *The New Urbanism* in America. The start of it is back in the 1950s when a woman called Jane Jacobs lived in Hudson Street, brought up her children in a house on Hudson Street and realised what a good place for living and for family life the traditional urban street was. She wrote a very important book called *Death and Life of Great European Cities*, which every architect has read and which is still one of the most important texts in our understanding of cities, despite being fifty years old now. It is so valuable because it is about how a family can live a good, rich life in a dense urban environment. This message has been slowly trickling back into real policy and real action. One of the important stepping points in that was the report *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, which was published in 1999, exactly ten years ago. It was written by a very important group of architects and others, including Professor Anne Powers of the London School of Economics, and chaired by Richard Rogers, one of our leading architects. This report to the British government is very important because it spells out the philosophy of how we can design modern cities that are compact and connected and thus allow families to live in larger, integrated homes. In this modern city people do not need to drive because they can walk, cycle, take the bus or the train and fill their lives as part of the larger unity without dependence on a private vehicle.

This report and its diagrams were written in 1999, at the beginning of a great property boom. That boom is now finished. We have come to the end of a historic episode in which all European cities – Madrid, Paris, certainly London and Manchester, essentially, wherever you come from – have been transformed. It is time to take stock and see how well we have done in making a city a good place for families to live. Perhaps we should make that balance sheet, that assessment at

those scales which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. We will begin with the urban scale, the scale of the city. I think it is possible to claim that cities have become very much more aware of their need to express the identity of place. People talk about urbanism now as 'place-making'. This is a wonderful diagram by the city architect of Leeds. It is a crazy diagram, but I love it because it is part of his attempt to help the people of Leeds understand the city that they live in. In it he is analysing the form of the city, its historic districts, its neighbourhoods, its growth areas, etc. It is a wonderful form of engagement and we find many cities having this dialogue with their citizens in this sort of way. There are all sorts of themes: the return of city living, the concept of intensification and the return of the city, which is a very deeply rooted and widely observable trend at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century.

If we move down in scale to the neighbourhood, planners are much more aware that neighbourhoods need to be walkable. They need to be shaped around what we call transit nodes, in other words, around places where the bus or train will stop. This is the centre of a higher density and a node to which people gather as a common point of unity. It is a very simple idea, but we had completely forgotten how to do this and we had been reinventing the techniques for this, as Americans would call it, 'transit-oriented-development'. Even further down in scale, we see how there has also been a lot of good progress at the street and the immediate residential neighbourhood level. We have discovered how to control traffic speed, for example. Designs like these are only possible because we impose restrictions of 15 or 20 kilometres per hour. We make the motorist slow down to the speed of the living space. Interestingly, it is through Germany that we have learned to control traffic speed. That, then, makes possible things such as road geometry, planting and all the aspects that make the street able to work in its two roles: as a play place and a meeting space as well as the means by which we can drive home with the shopping from the car. Consequently, there is also concern towards trying to reintegrate different types of activity. For most of the twentieth century we separated shopping areas, offices, and housing, but now we are putting it all back together again. We have been thinking of the city as urbanists.

On most levels, I think the programme for this report is very positive. It is much less positive when we come down to the level of the house. Here I am referring to Britain. This is something Anglo-Saxons, have done very badly. We have not protected the quality of the family at the level of the curtilage of the house and the interior of the home. These past ten years have been years of shrinking gardens, reduced balcony sizes, and of an enormous property boom where we have provided hundreds of thousands of apartments with no external storage space. Many of the flats we have built, have been flats with what we call 'Juliet balconies' which is a nice way of saying no balcony at all, simply a rail so that you do not fall to the ground below. Most worrying of all, if we move inside the house we find that this enormous property boom has given us a huge stock of very small accommodation of very reduced size. This is the only country in Europe in which property developers do not tell you the size of a dwelling. They do not announce that you are buying a fifty square metre flat or a forty-five square metre flat. It is a nasty secret that they do not reveal. They will tell you it is a two-bedroom flat, but those bedrooms are not big enough for a double bed or a homework table. This is a really big issue and people are just becoming aware of it. The Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, has just started a campaign to try and make people more aware of the scandal of our too-small-houses. There is a website called 'Swing a Cat' in which you can explore the scandal of undersized housing in the UK.

To finish, I would say that it has not been a bad decade in some ways. We have not done badly at making our towns better for families except in this one crucial respect of defending good space standards for living. That is why Richard Rogers looked to Europe when he wrote the report. We must also look to our partner countries in Europe if we want to see really good examples of cities that are fit for families to make their homes in.