

Creating Communities: places beyond the pandemic

*How can place-based policy and regeneration enhance
communities and prosperity?*

ONWARD➤



About the conference

Creating Communities: Places beyond the pandemic, was an international three half day conference between Monday 21 September and Wednesday 23 September 2020. It was hosted jointly by Onward and Create Streets. A full list of speakers and the agenda is available at: www.creatingcommunities.co

About Onward

Onward is a not-for-profit thinktank registered in England and Wales (no. 11326052). Our mission is to renew the centre right for the next generation, by coming up with bold new ideas and reaching out to new groups of people.

You can find out more about us on our website at www.ukonward.com and @ukonward on all major social media.

About Create Streets

Create Streets is an independent research institute registered in England and Wales (no. 08332263) which has made a major impact on the debate on planning and housing in England and Wales. We exist to make it easier to create beautiful, resilient, economically and socially successful developments with strong local support. To this end we research associations and correlations between design and the development process with good wellbeing, health, prosperity, value and sustainability.

Introduction: levelling up, place-making and planning reform. Do they contradict or coalesce?

Nicholas Boys Smith and Will Tanner

This Parliament, more than any recent predecessor, will be about place. The general election was, if nothing else, a demand to fix Britain's deep geographic disparities in economic opportunity and social fabric. Since March, the threat of the pandemic has shaken our longstanding belief in the agglomerating power of cities, the efficiency of gardenless flats, and the wisdom of a commuting economy. Meanwhile policymakers have fixed their sights on two of the most contentious but potentially transformative areas of policy: planning reform and devolution. Far from making reform harder, the combination of these challenges creates an opportunity to make places imbued with pride, belonging and opportunity.

Cynics will say that they have heard this all before. So what do we need to do to ensure things are different this time? First, we must return to first principles of what makes a good place. We know, from Create Streets and Onward's respective work over the years, that certain things matter more than others. We need beauty, not just function, gentle density rather than monolithic towers or suburban cul-de-sacs, and a focus on people, not cars. We need to think about encouraging places that bring people together to form enduring relationships and build civic and physical institutions that last. This is why streets and squares are at the heart of some of our most loved places.

Others may say there are tensions between levelling up, place-making and planning reform. If these strands are pursued in isolation this is a risk. Levelling up will not succeed if development continues to be concentrated in the London and the South East or the lived environment of towns in the North and Midlands continues to deteriorate. But taken together, as a joined-up policy, there is the potential for real, lasting change that rejuvenates the historic centres of Britain's regional towns and levels up the economies in which they sit. That is the prize we are focused on: how to create communities beyond the pandemic.

1.

Levelling up



Levelling up after a pandemic?

James O'Shaughnessy

Earlier in September 2020, Onward published *The State of our Social Fabric*, a landmark piece of research that attempted to quantify - for the first time - the strength of Britain's communities using a wide range of statistical measures. While the headline finding was of a long-term weakening in the social fabric, confirming earlier polling on the public's belief in such a decline, the most revealing aspect was the extent to which this decline has affected communities unevenly. Wealthier parts of Britain and its cities have largely maintained their social fabric, but post-industrial towns, coastal communities and suburbia have seen the ties that bind them weaken over time. Despite some positives, such as improving educational standards and falling crime, the important threads that make up the social fabric - relationships, physical infrastructure, economic value, civic institutions and positive social norms - are fraying in these areas.

This insight lends a new dimension to the debate about levelling up. Despite the close relationship between prosperity and community strength, rebuilding our social and cultural institutions in Britain's left behind places is not simply a job for economic policy. To believe so, as many in the British state have done for decades, is a category error. Yes, these places need better jobs and housing, but they also need strong local civic institutions, more agency and control over local decisions, and above all a sense that their place - where they belong - truly matters to those in distant positions of authority.

The pandemic has amplified this emerging inequality, and added new aspects to it. The research team carried out a range of qualitative workshops to understand what community means to people, and what impact COVID has had. The results revealed that in places with strong social fabric there has been a coming together, a rallying round, whereas in places where it is more frayed communities have felt under even greater pressure. Moreover, new polling we carried out revealed a generational divide - the pandemic has made older people more trusting in their neighbours and more connected to their communities. Younger people, especially the under 25s, have had the opposite experience, compounding the heart-breaking epidemic of loneliness already suffered by this age group. The consequences of this anomaly, and the mental health impacts it produces, risk scarring this generation for their lifetime.

What does this mean for policy? The *Repairing our Social Fabric* programme has focussed on analysis up to now, but we are swiftly moving on to proposing solutions. A few ideas are emerging: the importance of local hubs, especially sports clubs and cultural institutions that provide a gathering point for the community. The need for a genuine devolution of political power to very local areas, and a reconnection between civic authority and the electorate. More secure housing tenures and jobs. And giving people more time to reconnect with their neighbours and places.

It is often said that political science will not value what it cannot count. Onward's Social Fabric Index offers the chance to break that cycle - there is no escaping its conclusions or avoiding the spotlight it has shone on those places where the social fabric is fraying and the people who are most affected. It will make the task of levelling up more challenging, of course, but it makes it more important than ever.

Heritage: is it worth it?

Ian Morrison

Heritage is everywhere; in our big cities, our industrial towns and our rural villages – it is on every high street and every doorstep. It is constantly evolving and it is the management of that change – as well as protecting and championing our historic places - that sits at the heart of the work of Historic England, the heritage protection system, and the wider planning system.

We know that heritage brings irreplaceable value to people and places. It contributes a total GVA of £31 billion a year and provides 464,000 jobs. Heritage unites people and levels up places. It is the most democratic and accessible asset of our nation's cultural life and an essential source of pride, social cohesion and local identity: 93% of people agree that local heritage raises their quality of life and 80% think it makes their area a better place to live. Heritage provides opportunities for communities to directly influence the places where they live and work. Compiling local lists of significant historic buildings and identifying new uses for those at risk are ways in which people can articulate what it is about a place they most value. This essential relationship between people and local heritage, and the value of meaningful community engagement to successful places is increasingly recognised, cultivated and celebrated through the work of national organisations like the Architectural Heritage Fund and Civic Voice, as well as through Historic England's own Heritage Action Zone programme.

But is this the case everywhere? Does every community have the same opportunity to value and protect their local heritage, and champion and celebrate the distinctiveness and character it brings? Large parts of the country are not yet able to tap in to this rich resource; and solving that problem is a challenge for us all.

It's better up north

Charles Campion

Since forming over 25 years ago, JTP has worked throughout the UK, including northern England, to create new places and breathe life into old ones. Our 'Collaborative Placemaking' process involves working with local communities to co-design visions and masterplans for whole towns, neighbourhoods and key urban sites. Our goal is to co-create places with a strong sense of identity where life in all senses can flourish, places that are economically thriving, culturally stimulating and environmentally gainful.

Putting people at the heart of the creative process helps to unearth the real needs of a community, inspire positivity and goodwill, and build consensus. Far from imposing ready-made off the shelf solutions, we create Visions together.

To build on the opportunities and potentials of northern towns and cities requires an appreciation of the complex interrelationships that make up each place and the locally specific initiatives needed to drive them forward. We have found that combining local knowledge with professional expertise is key to building consensus and setting the right path.

Viewing places through the lens of collaborative placemaking can reveal new insights and develop balanced, appropriately-scaled solutions, where process can be as important as physical outcome.

- Economic: co-designing inviting, popular places will generate added value and will naturally attract investment.
- Social capital: all communities have resources that can be tapped into by building networks of mutual obligation, support and trust.
- Environmental: holistic and locally-based approaches are needed to serve the interests of the entire community and the living world.

We congratulate Create Streets and Onward for curating the *Creating Communities* conference in these challenging times and we are delighted to sponsor the 'It's Better Up North' breakout session, chaired by Toby Lloyd of the *No Place Left Behind Commission*. With an impressive array of speakers from the Northern Powerhouse geography exploring the theme of 'Community, Enterprise & Place', the discussion was inspired by Mary Clear, co-founder of Incredible Edible Todmorden. She amply demonstrated her understanding of the interrelationships that run through successful places when she said to me recently, "local business is the lifeblood of our community."

New Localism in the Age of Pandemics

Bruce Katz

In 2018, Jeremy Nowak and I published *The New Localism: How Cities Can Thrive in the Age of Populism*. Our thesis was straightforward. Over the past several decades, cities have emerged as the vanguard of addressing the world's toughest challenges: climate change, inter-generational poverty, relentless technological change and economic restructuring, housing un-affordability, to name just a few.

The rise of the city state as problem solvers has coincided with the declining impact of many national governments for several reasons. National governments are exclusively governments, subject to hyper partisan politics and polarization. Cities are networks of public, private and civic leaders, who tend to embrace pragmatism rather than ideological rigidity and reward action rather than obstruction.

National governments operate via vertical, 20th century silos, bureaucracies separated by language, culture and specialized expertise. Cities, by contrast, nimbly match complex challenges with interdisciplinary, multi-sectoral solutions that are customized to local priorities, rather than compartmentalized, one-size-fits-all responses.

Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic has largely validated our thesis, despite the fact that national governments have played critical roles (or not) in both the public health and economic spheres.

In the United States, for example, city stakeholders mobilized quickly to set up relief funds to stabilize local small businesses. These relief funds used a broad array of distribution channels for capital (including local governments, philanthropies, business chambers and community development lenders), enabling them to provide rapid, flexible financing to meet the particular needs of very small businesses on the financial brink.

When the federal government did act, cities ensured maximum impact through community intermediaries that enabled, for example, under-banked small businesses to understand the terms and conditions of federal loan products and access them in real time.

And now, with the federal government mired in pre-election dysfunction, cities like Chicago and San Jose have already started to design ambitious recovery plans that seek to ensure that the post COVID economy is more sustainable and inclusive than the economy that preceded the pandemic. This is absolutely essential in the aftermath of the multiple crises of public health, economic contraction and police brutality that have revealed, once again, deep racial disparities on income, health and wealth.

Where do we go from here?

On the surface, the pandemics have shown the need for national governments to organize markets (e.g., the supply of needed health equipment) as well as provide a safety net for families and communities rocked by unemployment and the shuttering of small businesses. As we move from crisis to recovery, national governments will also be responsible for countercyclical investments in innovation, infrastructure and human capital and actions to guard against large firms and financial institutions further dominating the economy.

But the pandemics have also revealed the special roles played by local governments and networks. This argues that the post crisis period should combine needed national investment with more devolved power and programmatic flexibility, to ensure that localities -- cities, suburbs and rural areas -- can align national funds to vastly different local priorities and needs. And key community intermediaries should be imbued with more capacity and capital to ensure that underserved neighbourhoods and places are not overlooked.

The pandemics have simultaneously heightened the need for the national *and* revealed the power of the local. This is a new 21st century mix that is uniquely aligned with our distributed economies and diverse societies.

2.

Place-making



Is this the end or a new beginning for high streets?

Paul Clement

The UK is now slowly easing its way out of lockdown and over the next days, weeks and months will be gradually lifting the restrictions put in place as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a result, we will see our town and city centres begin to re-open, kick-starting the economy as people return to some semblance of normality. However, this is unlikely to be an easy process, especially as social distancing measures will remain in place for some time. With this in mind, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), property managers and local authorities will need to work together in order to safely and successfully stay open for business.

Although the lockdown has been catastrophic for some, it has also given stakeholders the chance to pause and reflect on a number of issues that have historically plagued the high street. While there is ultimately no silver bullet, taking time to reset, restart and recover will hopefully make a difference in the long term.

Town and city centres were already undergoing a period of dramatic change, even prior to Covid-19. While there will be new challenges to face, the pandemic will serve to quicken the pace of this transformation. The opportunity to reset how we view the high street, assessing what works and what doesn't and, as a result, creating a place that people want rather than need to be is now more important than ever. Casualties will unfortunately be inevitable, but how we fill these vacancies should help to shape the future for the better.

On a more practical level is the need to restart. Places shut down overnight, but reopening will not be quite as easy. Countries that have already left lockdown have shown that consumers are unlikely to return in their droves, but act with far more caution. This will mean a period of re-engaging with customers and ensuring they feel confident that it is, first and foremost, safe to return to public places.

This then brings us to the long road to recovery. Most urban centres will be irreversibly changed by the pandemic. Consequently, this will require new ways of thinking around viability, planning, redevelopment and repurposing. Essential questions we need to ask include what will be the primary purpose of these places in the future and how will we use them in a post Covid-19 world? Shopping has historically been the default answer, but this is unlikely to remain the case in a future where town centres will need to become more about living, working and socialising.

Rebuilding these places will take time and of course money, which is why the Government's announcement of a £6.1 million Resilience Fund was met with relief by many as BIDs will be crucial to both restart and recovery efforts. As then-High Streets Minister Simon Clark MP once said, the Fund is designed to help 'support local businesses, empower communities, champion our town centres and drive forward the renewal of our high streets.'

If nothing else, Covid-19 has created an opportunity to consider the places we once took for granted, which can only be a positive moving forward.

Town or City?

Will Tanner

The death of the city has been much exaggerated throughout history. In the wake of the Second World War, policymakers worried about the decline of once-thriving industrial centres like Leipzig and San Francisco. In the last decade of the 20th Century, the population of more than one in four cities around the world shrunk. At the turn of the millennium, the inner cities of New York and London became synonymous with crime and social fragmentation. Every time cities have defied expectations. Today they are now glittering metropolises that power our agglomerated economies.

Will this time - an unprecedented pandemic - be different? The latest statistics show profound changes in people's behaviour since the lockdown started in March. Today, 36 percent of workers are working mainly or completely from home, compared to just 14 percent in the final quarter of last year. Polls predict a lasting fall in commuting of around a fifth after the virus. Major cities are still experiencing less than half the footfall they were experiencing at the end of February, with London still 69 percent below the pre-pandemic baseline. Meanwhile towns like Wigan and Doncaster are benefiting from higher footfall already.

The honest answer is that it is too soon to tell how our work and living patterns will change from coronavirus, especially if we suffer a second wave. But outcomes are not entirely out of policymakers' control. The Government wants to avoid a short-term shock to the cities which are currently the engine of growth and primary generator of tax receipts. That is sensible. But in doing so they should not stand in the way of a longer-term shift towards a more balanced spatial economy, where towns are themselves hubs of specialised industry and innovation. Especially in the North of England, whose economy is now 25 percent smaller than London's, it is towns where opportunity has been most lacking.

Housing is a key part of this agenda. It is true we need to densify our cities. But we also need to thoughtfully invest in our towns, where a combination of good existing housing stock and lower land values makes new homes more affordable for young people. That is why it was so important that the Government announced this month that two thirds of the affordable housing budget will be spent outside London, up from half in the last Parliament. It is also why the levelling up agenda must urgently move from intent to action, boosting not just the physical environment of lagging places but their social fabric - the civic institutions and social relationships that underpin their communities too. As Onward's recent *Social Fabric Index* shows, the places with fraying communities are often post-industrial and coastal towns.

In his first speech as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson set out four lessons from the success of London and Manchester that he wanted to apply to all kinds of place. They were to make places more liveable, better connected, culturally more creative, and to empower places with greater responsibility and accountability. In the midst of the general election, Brexit and pandemic that followed, it has been too easy to forget that vision. We should get back to it.

Top tips for successful design codes

Ben Bolgar

Design codes are a good way of engaging local communities in what the character of any new development near them should look and feel like. Key to this is asking local communities' which buildings and places in their area are the most loved and popular and then going and visiting them to study and measure them. It is important when doing this to ask people to select examples that they think can inform development that can be built now so that the precedent studies are relevant. It is also a good idea to discuss what the likely cost of building new buildings in a similar character would be today. This tends to make discussions about local examples much more focussed and practical.

When writing the design code, the two areas that have the most 'teeth' tend to be dimensioned drawings and a building materials specification so it is crucial to make sure that these are clear and also suited to local market conditions. Engaging local builders and developers in the coding process and looking at build costs and sales values locally is also necessary so the code is calibrated to the local area. In terms of implementation it is far better if the code can be controlled by land ownership and covenants, where developers build under license, than it is through planning adoption alone as it is relatively easy to water down standards throughout the life of a development.

Why we're co-creating local homes by a Grade I listed church

Canon Angus Ritchie

Over the last four years, the people of the church (and the wider parish) of St George-in-the-East has been learning the power of community organising to bring people together across difference to improve their neighbourhoods. We are learning how to listen more deeply to one another, and to take action on the issues that concern us.

In this local listening process, decent and affordable housing has come out as one of the most urgent issues. Members of St George's have worked with neighbours in other churches and mosques, schools and tenants' associations in Citizens UK – on a range of issues, from winning new lampposts in an unlit park to securing forty affordable homes on a piece of land on Cable Street.

Now we are exploring something even more ambitious.

When Nicholas Hawksmoor built our church, it was set in the midst of housing destroyed during the Blitz. There are members of our congregation who remember playing in the ruins of those homes. As part of Create Streets and Citizens UK's community co-design process, we hope to develop beautiful and affordable homes on that same site today, and to secure temporary accommodation for homeless people on undeveloped land immediately opposite.

Listening, discerning and acting form a virtuous circle; each time we go round that "circle," we emerge with stronger relationships and more confident local leaders. We're delighted to be working with Create Streets and Citizens UK, not only to develop exciting plans, but to organise together to turn them into realities.

3.

Planning



Planning for the future

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP

Our current planning system is broken.

It doesn't deliver beautiful homes, and it importantly doesn't deliver nearly enough homes.

Local building plans were supposed to help councils and their residents deliver more homes in their area. Yet they take on average seven years to agree in the form of lengthy and absurdly complex documents and accompanying policies - understandable only to the lawyers who feast upon every word.

Under the current system, it takes an average of five years for a standard housing development to go through the planning system - before a spade is even in the ground.

Seven years to make a plan, five years to get permission to build the houses and slow delivery of vital infrastructure.

This is why the Prime Minister has been clear that we need an ambitious response that matches the scale of the challenge in front of us – meeting the target of building 300,000 homes per year. We are consulting on how to deliver these homes in the fairest and most sensitive way.

These are a once in a generation set of reforms that lays the foundations for a better future.

We owe it to the next generation to radically reform the existing system, so we can offer them a future where our children and grandchildren can afford to own their own home.

We were making good progress before the pandemic.

Last year we built more new homes than at any time in the last 30 years, taking the total delivered since 2010 to 1.5 million. The proportion of young homeowners increased after declining for more than a decade.

But there is only so much we can do without reform. Since 1970 France has built 16.7 million new homes. The UK has built 8.9 million. Last year we built fewer homes per person than Poland and Belarus.

One reason why is an antiquated planning system that is holding back our country's enormous potential – a system that makes planning authorities judge every single development on a case by case basis – as inconsistent a process as it is slow.

At the heart of this challenge sits a simple fact: we need more homes – homes that our planning system has, for decades, failed to deliver.

Maintaining the status quo is simply not an option.

We need a system that can help us meet the future with confidence.

We propose a clear and transparent set of regulations: one that is faster, more consistent and easier to navigate...

... A system that moves us from blueprints in a council basement, to interactive maps at our fingertips...

... A system that draws on the views of our communities, not just the 1% of people who have the esoteric knowledge to navigate the arcane and protracted world of planning processes.

It's about smarter more intelligent regulation, for a more rational, predictable and popular system.

About building the homes our country desperately needs by unlocking land and new opportunities, bridging the generational divide and recreating an ownership society.

And about providing for younger and future generations who deserve the same opportunities as those who came before them - security and a stake in society. This sense of generational duty and obligation is what defines and guides our proposals.

Do we need to reform planning?

Bridget Rosewell

Many people have said that you can achieve anything you want to in the UK's planning system. This is true, so long as you have the energy and resources but that doesn't make it a good system. It is opaque, riddled with conflict at every level, and produces development of poor quality. My aim in being part of the Task Force helping form the White Paper was to try and move us towards a better system, without at the same time bringing everything to a halt while people get their heads round it.

From my perspective a key change is to simplify and make more engaging the Local Plan process. Requiring engagement before a plan is prepared, identifying areas for major and minor development on a map that people can see are designed to enable more effective engagement and a voice for the silent. Shorter and more engaging plans can free up planners' and developers' time to think about design, as well as resource to provide it.

A second major proposal is properly to deal with developer contributions which have become unnecessarily complex, with CIL as well as s106 negotiations. Once again the time and resource that goes into negotiation militates against good decision making and we need a system which gives local authorities and communities more control over the monies raised.

Finally there is the vexed question of housing targets. The White Paper suggests several ways into this to replace a statistical method which is far too reliant on inadequate models of 'need'. Getting a good balance between top down and bottom up views on this will be key output of the consultation. Be imaginative in responding!

Place-based partnerships can help us to build stronger communities

Helen Evans

There are around 1,600 housing associations in England, providing homes for around six million people. Each plays a role in the communities it serves which varies by need and concentration of homes. Despite these variations all associations share the aim of delivering good quality affordable homes, and the belief that good homes provide the essential foundation for people living their best lives.

Housing associations provide homes for all kinds of people at all stages of life: our mission is to help people who cannot entirely meet their housing needs through their own resources. This might be people who can't afford private rent or to buy outright or need supported or specialist accommodation.

We provide housing options for essential workers on low incomes. At Network Homes we have an extensive portfolio of key worker homes and I'm proud we were able to offer accommodation to the additional healthcare professionals brought in to work at the intensive care unit at Northwick Park Hospital in Brent at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the busiest units in the country.

Housing associations are community-based organisations and make long term commitments to the places they work in. Many run services for local people, including employment and training advice workshops, apprenticeships, financial support and youth schemes. Their role is to enable and support and they deliver most effectively when working with communities and partner organisations to maximise capacity for change.

Our approach to partnership benefits from assessing what we are best placed to deliver and what can be most effectively provided by others. It is the job of central government to provide the essential safety net for people in financial difficulty but we can supplement this by excellent advice and support and on occasion by practical assistance in crisis situations. We can provide secure housing for people who need specialist or expert support and work in partnership with both the statutory and voluntary services who can provide that help. These kind of partnerships are working all over the country in, for example, the support of homeless households, mental health, local government, the criminal justice system, education and in youth services.

Where resources are scarce housing associations have tended to try and fill the gaps themselves but this is not always the best way because we don't have the expertise or are not sufficiently present in the community. In these circumstances we work best when we partner with community organisations – or simply show people the way to them. There are many positive stories of the support G15 landlords have given their residents and communities during the lockdown. Many of these are of working with simple support mechanisms and signposting to the many community groups. We saw that mutual aid sprang up faster than we could have provided it.

In more structured relationship with the voluntary sector Network Homes has been able to deliver tangible results. For instance, our partnership with New Horizon Youth Centre has provided secure accommodation for homeless young people. We provide the homes and New Horizons the social support. With Hestia we have provided homes to support and protect victims of modern slavery. We are also in the process of bidding for a housing first scheme with Look Ahead that will provide additional intensive support to former rough sleepers and make new homes available for social rent.

There are many hundreds of other examples of the place-based partnerships housing associations are working in to empower communities and help people out of housing need. But undoubtedly there is more that could be done. I look forward to discussing these themes in more detail at the Creating Communities conference, in the meantime if you are looking for a powerful local partner to support your community – don't be shy in approaching housing associations.

Can modular homes be beautiful?

Francis Terry

Many people think that off-site methods are the only way of meet our housing needs. The perception is that this is cheaper and quicker because it avoids many of the problems of a traditional building site. Minimizing time on site has many advantages. One manufacturer claims it can build a house in 20 days in the factory which can then be erected on site in a matter of hours.

We are not in a hypothetical realm here. Building houses in factories is already done in vast quantities. Japan and Germany are leading the way, but the U.K. has already started to embrace this new trend.

Can these prefabricated houses be beautiful? Beautiful boats, cars, bicycles, furniture, clothes, shoes, or whatever you care to mention, can be made in factories, and so why not houses? It can certainly be done in timber; the Americans have been building attractive prefabricated timber houses for years. To do this using heavy materials like brick is more complex but I believe quite possible.

In order to build in volume, houses must be popular and tap into what most people find beautiful. The modernist style can be very beautiful, but it is not for everyone. A popular house needs to be more general in its appeal. For this I would suggest that designing in the traditional style rather than a modern style is the answer. Every estate agent knows that it is far easier to sell a traditional style house than a modern one. This is backed up polls and pricing studies.

The Georgian style is particularly applicable to the current housing crisis because it was built in such a huge volume and at an incredible speed. Classicism was maintained throughout the Victorian era and up until the First World War. The developers of the 18th and 19th century wanted to build quickly and cheaply and so it is useful to see how they produced beautiful buildings within the same parameters. A striking feature of these buildings is the repetition of all architectural elements. The use of repeated elements makes the building process more efficient because it eliminates one-off items which are time consuming and costly to produce.

Many architects like to make their buildings look original and fear being 'pastiche'. For some reason architects always try to avoid being labelled in this way, but I feel that as with all art forms, the artist (or architect in this case) is part of a tradition stretching back thousands of years that evolves and develops over time. Generations of architects have tried to make beautiful buildings and it is worth benefiting from their knowledge. To avoid being pastiche is, in my opinion, the biggest stumbling block to the production of beautiful houses. It is a far greater obstacle than the engineering problem of producing beautiful houses off-site. If we can get to the moon and split the atom, the technical issues of making beautiful homes in a factory is well within our capabilities.

The small sites' conundrum: why aren't we getting more housing from small urban sites?

Judith Salomon

Small sites were once an important contributor to housing supply. Thirty years ago, 40 percent of the country's homes were delivered by small builders, today it is just 12 percent. Property development has become the domain of big business and big sites.

For the past fifteen years Pocket Living has delivered discounted affordable homes for first time buyers on small sites in London. We know the many challenges this poses and the time it takes, and that a supportive planning environment could unleash the potential of small urban sites and increase housing delivery. This is why we commissioned Lichfields to undertake research into the planning journey of small sites in London, to identify the trends and challenges and help inform the debate and planning policy. In Planning for the Future, the Government has recognised the challenges faced by small sites and small developers and is proposing ways to address these. We hope that this research provides a useful contribution to make this a reality.

The average determination time was a staggering 60 weeks; only one site was determined in the statutory period. Almost half the time was spent agreeing the S106, once the planning committee had already resolved to grant planning permission.

For three quarters of the sites, viability and affordable housing was a principal cause of delaying. A third of the sites stalled over land value and the affordable housing offer. We are asking small sites to do too much; expecting them to meet the same policies as large sites and accommodate multiple uses and tenures. Inevitably this is leading to protracted debate as it is not possible physically or viably.

Small sites deliver homes faster, including affordable homes. With a clear and simple path, we could see a renaissance in small, beautiful buildings that bring redundant sites back to life. A more proportionate planning system for small sites would encourage simplicity, set high standards of design and create a more streamlined approach to affordable housing. In this there is much to be hopeful of in the Government's approach; it is a good start but needs to go further.

The rule of limited repetition

Jeff Speck

No matter how welcoming a building facade is, nobody wants to walk past 300 feet of it. That's more than a minute of the exact same thing. Unless the ground floor is made up of shops or individual stoops, more than a few dozen feet of the same facade treatment gets boring. It also suggests a scale of development that is inhuman, a message that, while unfortunately accurate, is best hidden for the sake of walkability

Fast, large-scale development is a sad fact of contemporary real estate practice. When building big projects, most developers find it easier to hire a single architect. Then the trouble begins. Intellectual honesty, ego, and budget all point to the same outcome: a single huge building, or the same smaller building repeated. The hand of the singular architect is visible throughout, so travel along the edges of the building provides no variation or surprise. The walk, unrewarded, is less likely to be taken. As Jane Jacobs noted, "Almost nobody travels willingly from sameness to sameness and repetition to repetition, even if the physical effort required is trivial."²⁵²

Modern development practice, with its large infusions of capital, naturally leads to problems of both scale and repetition. Scale is an easier issue to address: building codes should require developers to break their large projects down into smaller buildings. Avoiding repetition, however, is more difficult to legislate through codes, so it is best perpetrated by city staff on a day-to-day basis, through encouragement and cajoling.

The best approach, by far, is to distribute the buildings to a collection of different architects. It's more work, but developers should be reminded that the most sophisticated builders take this path of their own volition. They understand that architectural variety contributes to a sense of place, which enhances real estate value.

There are other advantages to sharing a project among multiple design firms. A healthy sense of competition prevails, and no one firm becomes overwhelmed with work, or lazy in the confidence of a huge payday. And when an architect makes an error, like choosing the wrong sealant, it impacts one building and not a half dozen.

From *Walkable City Rules* by Jeff Speck

What does success mean for a Strong Town?

Charles Marohn

The Suburban Experiment provides the tantalizing prospect of ultimate achievement. We can plan for something, go do it, and then be done. We can toil every day in the belief that some day the labour will end because we will have achieved what we set out to do.

I've seen this with engineers who delay their retirement to complete that last sewer extension. Or the mayor who runs for re-election so that they can see that grant request finalized.

I don't deny the sense of accomplishment these tasks can bring, but it's not how we measure success in a Strong Town. The sewer will someday need to be dug up and completely replaced. That grant request is a transaction that brings fleeting benefits, and possible long-term commitments. I'm watching my school district preparing to raze an historic school that was someone else's ribbon-cutting a century ago.

In other words, none of these things ever end with completion. We entertain a form of self-indulgence when we look at the world so narrowly. Success in a Strong Town is not measured by the number of projects seen to completion because there is no completion. We'll never be completely done.

Building a Strong Town means to live a good life in a prosperous place. That's it. There is a saying from Judaism that helps explain what a good life is: *"It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either."*

A good life is a life of meaning, one where your individual contributions towards reaching the perfect completion add to the intergenerational partnership you both inherited and will pass on. A good life is one spent doing good. We all have that capacity.

Our ancestors had lives far more difficult, with far fewer material comforts, in places of lesser accomplishment and success, than nearly all of us do. Yet, they almost all experienced prosperity in a way that seems elusive to us. That's because prosperity is also not a destination but a measurement over time.

To live in a prosperous place, the work has to matter. In this intergenerational partnership, each of us builds onto a solid foundation that allows the next generation to get that much closer to perfection. The measurement of that building is prosperity.

Today, the co-creation described by Jane Jacobs has been replaced by a deferment. In the Suburban Experiment, we now build things to a finished state and then, through paying our taxes and fees, expect that it will be maintained on our behalf.

Success for a Strong Town means living a good life in a prosperous place. It is an approach where everyone is called upon to do what they can with what they have. It means working incrementally, across generations. It is a shared effort to add to a solid and stable foundation, one that will lift us ever closer to an elusive perfection.

Conference agenda

21 September – 23 September 2020

Monday 21 September

Session	Description	Speakers
Introduction to first day and invitation to co-design 14:45-14:55	Welcome to Creating communities 2020 and to first of our three themes: 'levelling-up' Invitation to observe live community co-design session.	Nicholas Boys Smith and Will Tanner David Milner, Create Streets
Live co-design drop-in session 15:00-18:00	We will be live co-designing with community members for a site in the London borough of Tower Hamlets, aiming to create beautiful affordable homes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • David Milner, Create Streets • Revd Angus Ritchie, St George in the East • Miriam Brittenden • Community members
Panel discussion 15:00-15:50 Still levelling up?	This session will explore how the levelling up agenda is (or is not) influenced by the events of 2020. It will ask how people can take greater ownership of their place in a way which can also interact with large sources of capital investment. How can bottom-up activity 'scale up'? How can big capital work cost-efficiently in smaller parcels?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lord O'Shaughnessy • Cllr David Williams, Chairman, CCN • Vidhya Alakeson, CEO, Power to Change • Melissa Mean, We Can Make Knowle West • Bim Afolami, MP <p>Chair: Will Tanner, Onward</p>
Levelling up breakout sessions 16:00-16:50	Heritage: is it worth it? In economically challenged areas, low land values often mean that the conversion of historic buildings is financially unviable. Heritage is being demolished and replaced with nondescript low-grade development, depriving communities of their heritage as well as decent places to live and work. Can we fix this?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duncan Wilson, Director, Historic England • Nicola Chance-Thompson, Piece Hall • Mark Latham, Urban Splash • Adala Leeson, Historic England <p>Chair: Liz Peace CBE, Chair The Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation</p>
	"It's better up north" Community, Enterprise & Place: the lifeblood of our northern towns. Is the post-COVID world a challenge or an opportunity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charles Campion, JTP • Jane Scullion, Calderdale Borough Council • Cathy Parker, Institute of Place Management • Mary Clear, Incredible Edible • Mark Cropper, Cropper PLC <p>Chair: Toby Lloyd, Chair, No Place Left Behind Commission</p>
In conversation with... 17:10-17:50 Bruce Katz, author of The New Localism	This 'in conversation' session with leading international expert on the 'new localism' Bruce Katz, will explore the policies that are crucial to human wellbeing and how to achieve them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bruce Katz, Inaugural Centennial Scholar at Brookings Institute <p>Chair: Ben Rogers, Centre for London</p>
18:00-18:30 Virtual happy hour and networking session		

Tuesday 22 September

Session	Description	Speakers
Introduction to second day 09:00-09:35	Welcome to second of our three themes: place-making.	Nicholas Boys Smith
In conversation with... 09:05-09:35 Lord Glasman	Why have people felt a loss of identity in recent decades?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lord Glasman, Chair, Common Good Foundation <p>Chair: Will Tanner, Onward</p>
Panel session 09:45-10:35 Is this the end or a new beginning for prosperous high streets and town centres?	This Dragons' Den style session will include a series of practical ideas and quick examples of successful high street management or revival (with voting) followed by a moderated discussion of the role of mixed use, flexibility, town centre management and community-led activity in ensuring prosperous town centres.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rachel Campbell, Head of Regeneration and Infrastructure, MHCLG • John Hoyle, CEO, Sook • David Rudlin, Chair, Academy of Urbanism <p>Chair: Jeremy Hinds, Savills</p>
10:35-11:15 Videos of case study projects over break		
Feedback session 11:15-11:40	Feedback from community co-design sessions and visits	Canon Dr Angus Ritchie and co-design participants
Masterclass 11:15-11:55	A masterclass in design codes and how to use them effectively to create great places.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ben Bolgar, Prince's Foundation <p>Chair: Andy von Bradsley, Government Architect</p>
Keynote speech (Government) 12:00-12:40	A talk to set out the Government's approach to planning reform, regeneration, housing, placemaking with Q&A.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, Secretary of State <p>Chair: Nicholas Boys Smith</p>
12:40-13:15 Videos of case study projects over lunch break		
Panel session 13:30-14:20 Town or city? Should the focus for housing and investment be in towns or cities?	Where should good development be focused? Town or city? Will COVID-19 lead to long term change in development patterns or is it a blip? How can development support a stronger social fabric? And how can it undermine it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rob Perrins, CEO, Berkeley Group • Lord Barwell, former Housing Minister and No.10 Chief of Staff • Simon Dudley, Chairman, Homes England • Ian Harvey, Civic Voice <p>Chair: Kate Henderson, Chief Executive, NHF</p>
In conversation with... 14:20-15:00	Creating a street in Norwich: the story of Goldsmith Street.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • David Mikhail, Founding Director of Mikhail Riches, Stirling Prize Winners 2019 <p>Chair: Melissa York, The Times</p>

Wednesday 23 September

Session	Description	Speakers
Introduction to third day 09:00-09:05	Welcome to third of our three themes: Planning	Will Tanner
In conversation with... 09:05-09:45 The future of planning	This session will explore the future of planning with members of the Government's planning review panel and Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, following the publication of the Planning White Paper in August.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary Parsons, Chair, TCPA • Bridget Rosewell CBE, economist • Nicholas Boys Smith <p>Chair: Mark Prisk, former Housing Minister</p>
Panel session 09:45-10:35 Long term investment in place and quality	This session will explore how housing associations, and other organisations with a long-term incentive to invest in place and quality, can work together with communities to make successful places and the difficult questions of who should do what, where and when?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helen Evans, CEO, Network Homes • Helen Goulden, Chief Executive, Young Foundation • Ben Houchen, Mayor of Tees Valley • Mike Amesbury MP, Shadow Housing Minister <p>Chair: Lord Taylor of Goss Moor</p>
Breakout sessions 10:35-11:10	Can modular homes create beautiful, popular and healthy streets? Are they part of the solution or just an excuse to lower costs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mark Farmer, Independent Champion for Modern Methods of Construction • Robert Luck, Latis Homes • Francis Terry, Francis Terry and Associates • Rosie Toogood, Legal & General <p>Chair: Martina Lees, The Times</p>
	Planning for the future in the wake of the pandemic: How cities and towns are approaching the recovery? Are we moving from town centre working to 15 minute neighbourhoods?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tom Copley, Deputy Mayor, London • Janet Sanz, Deputy Mayor, Barcelona • Kersten England, Bradford Metropolitan District Council • Rob Walsh, CEO North East Lincolnshire Council • Donna Hall, former Wigan Council chief executive <p>Chair: Neil O'Brien MP</p>
Masterclass 11:15-11:45	The small sites' conundrum: why aren't we getting more housing from small urban sites? Research and discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judith Salomon and Nick Cuff, Pocket Living <p>Chair: Ian Tant</p>
Masterclass 11:45-12:30	Walkable placemaking: some practical lessons from the US	Jeff Speck, Author, Walkable City
In conversation with... 12:30-13:10	What is a strong town and how could be we creating stronger towns in the UK?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charles Marohn, Strong Towns <p>Chair: Nicholas Boys Smith</p>
Closing remarks		
13:15-13:45 Virtual cocktail party		

Contributors

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Nicholas Boys Smith is the founding director of Create Streets and was co-chair of the Government's Building Better Building Beautiful Commission.

Charles Campion RIBA AOU is a partner at JTP: architects, masterplanners, placemakers.

Paul Clement is head of place-shaping within the property management division at Savills.

Helen Evans is chair of the G15 group of London's largest housing associations and chief executive of Network Homes.

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP is a British Conservative Party politician serving as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government since 2019.

Bruce Katz is the founding director of the Nowak Metro Finance Lab at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

Charles Marohn is the Founder and President of Strong Towns and the author of *Strong Towns: A Bottom-Up Revolution to Rebuild American Prosperity*

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Bridget Rosewell OBE is an economist and has a non-executive portfolio with public and private organisations.

Judith Salomon is the Strategic Planning and Communications Director at the property developer Pocket Living.

Jeff Speck is the Founder of Speck & Associates, a private design consultancy, he is also an international renowned author.

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Francis Terry RIBA is the founding director of the architectural practice Francis Terry and Associates.

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