URBAN TASK FORCE

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The Urban Task Force Report has brought to our attention, that English towns and cities today require a new renaissance. The comprehensive planning has retarded urban living (Urban Renaissance, Sharing the Vision 0199, 1999). Forty percent of inner-urban housing stock is subsidized ‘social’ housing. A review of the demographic and development trends have lead to the UK Government’s new urban policy that prioritizes the regeneration of towns and cities by building on recycled urban land and protecting the countryside. As result, Urban Task Force (UTF) was founded with the following aims:

To identify causes of urban decline in England;
To recommend practical solutions how to bring people back into cities;
To establish a new vision for urban regeneration based on the principles of design excellence, social well being and environmental responsibility within a viable economic and legislative framework (Urban Task Force, 1999:1).

This paper represents the analysis of the economic and political effects of the program and its viability.

INTRODUCTION

The Urban Task Force Report has brought to our attention, that English towns and cities today require a new renaissance. Planning in the 1950s and 1960s placed too much emphasis on the physical provision of facilities and infrastructure and too little on community growth and reinvigoration. The comprehensive planning has retarded urban living (Urban Renaissance, Sharing the Vision 0199, 1999). Already some parts of even our most prosperous cities are experiencing serious problems. Derelict areas in the cities are becoming a sewer on national resources and places of a hard social division and economic uneasiness. Forty percent of inner-urban housing stock is subsidized ‘social’ housing. Around 1.3 million residential and commercial buildings are currently empty (Urban Task Force, 1999: 4). People are moving out from the cities in the suburbs and in the rural areas. Progression of this trend is putting an unbearable strain on the countryside, environment and on the quality of the life.

A review of the demographic and development trends have lead to the UK Government’s new urban policy that prioritizes the regeneration of towns and cities by building on recycled urban land and protecting the countryside. Urban Task Force therefore proposes a new vision for the cities based upon a mix of economic, residential and cultural activity, which will dissolve the anti-urban sentiment, which many of British residents feel.

Today 90 percent of population live in the urban settlements, 91 percent of economic output and 89 percent of jobs are in the urban areas and the 60 per cent of total UK public expenditure are spent on cities as well. There are also projections that between 1996 and 2021 additional 3.8 million households will be needed. Eighty percent of this demand will be for single person households, divorced or elderly people. Car traffic is predicted to grow by a third in the next 20 years. Britain is booming and there is a need to act immediately in order to prevent undesirable effects of the economic and demographic boom on the cities.

Under these circumstances the Department of Environment, Transport and Regions, headed by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, asked for a program which would help to solve forthcoming problems. As result, Urban Task Force (UTF) was founded with the following aims:

• To identify causes of urban decline in England;
• To recommend practical solutions how to bring people back into cities;
• To establish a new vision for urban regeneration based on the principles of design excellence, social well being and environmental responsibility within a viable economic and legislative framework (Urban Task Force, 1999:1).

PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS:

Well-designed buildings, streets and neighborhoods are essential for successful social, economic and environmental regeneration. New urban development, on brown fields or green field land must be designed to much higher architectural standards if they are to attract people back into towns and cities. These new developments should promote diversity and encourage a mix of activities, services, and tenants with different incomes within neighborhood. Land must be used efficiently, local traditions respected and negative environmental impacts kept to a minimum.

In order to achieve these aims, the UTF suggests that the government should prepare a national urban design framework, defining the core principles of urban design and setting out non-perspective guidelines showing how good design can support local plans and regeneration strategies. Additionally, UTF proposes that regeneration projects should be the subject of design competition. Local Architecture Centers need to be created in the
cities, to encourage stronger public involvement in design issues throughout sponsoring community projects, exhibitions and seminars (UTF, 1999: 6).

Since the program is made to promote Urban sustainability, UTF advises following of the principles of the Compact urban development \(^1\), where the main accent is on improving of public transport and reducing car traffic. The increasing environmental and health damage, as well as the increasing congestion caused by growth in car traffic have to be stopped. This can only take place by adopting policies that discriminate in favor of walking, cycling and public transport. Thus the UTF proposes introduction of Home Zones where pedestrians have priority over cars which will move at the speed limited at 20 mph. This can be achieved by using tested street design and traffic-calming measures.

Furthermore, they suggest the placement of Local Transport Plans on a statutory footing, with targets for reducing car journeys, and increasing year on year the proportion of trips made on foot, bicycle and public transport. The Government should commit a minimum of 65 percent of transport public expenditure to walking, cycling and public transport over the next ten years. Moreover, they suggest extension of a well-regulated franchise system for bus services to all English towns and cities if services have not improved substantially within five years. A final suggestion is to set a maximum standard of one car parking space per dwelling for all new urban residential development (UTF, 1999: 7). The poor environmental management and insecurity are the key reasons why so many people moved away from cities. In order to reverse this trend there should be assignment of a strategic role to local authorities in ensuring management of the whole urban environment. Stronger legislation would give them powers to ensure that, irrespective of ownership, land, buildings and public space were properly maintained. Another measure should be the placement of Town Improvement Zones where the cost of extra management and maintenance is shared between public and private sector. Another measure should be by the strengthening of the local powers to support their local authorities in the managing of the urban environment, combined with the sanctions against individuals or organizations that infringe regulations related to planning conditions, noise pollution, littering and other forms of anti-social behavior (UTF, 1999: 8).

Since the majority of the brownfield sites are inner-urban ex-industrial districts with large amounts of derelict, vacant and under-used land and buildings and estates they suffer from concentrated social deprivation. There is a need for the creation of designated Urban Priority Areas that will enable local authorities and their partners in regeneration, including local people, to apply for special packages of powers and incentives to assist neighborhood renewal. UTF recommends the strengthening of the New Commitment to Regeneration between central and local government and finally the enabling of Urban regeneration companies to co-ordinate or deliver area regeneration projects (UTF, 1999: 9). For the implementation of the suggested measures, there is a need for participation of skilled people. There is an urgent need for expertise in urban design, planning and property development.

According to the UTF, planning system should be also modified and the land use planning system should be introduced. Local development plans should be simplified with an emphasis on strategy to create a more flexible basis for planning. Planning policies for neighborhood regeneration need to be more flexible and to accelerate the release of land, which is no longer needed for employment purposes, for housing development. Development plans must become less detailed and more strategic in their outlook. They should be integrated with local transport, housing and economic strategies. Those simpler plans, supported with master plans and design guidance will enable faster decision making. Replacement of the negotiation of planning gain for smaller urban development schemes with a standardized system of impact fees is also recommended (UTF, 1999: 12).

Another recommendation of the UTF is concerned with managing of the land supply. New development should be based on the recycled, previously developed land since this represents the most sustainable option. This might be achieved if local authorities start working together across borough boundaries in producing urban capacity studies to determine how much additional development each area can absorb.

Local authorities can remove allocations of greenfield land for housing from development plans and they can introduce a statutory duty for public bodies and utilities with significant urban landholdings to release redundant land and buildings for regeneration. Very important step in promoting of development on the brownfield land is removing the obligation for authorities to prove a specific and economically viable scheme when making Compulsory Purchase Orders (UTF, 1999: 13).

In order to achieve all proposed goals it is very important to define the ways of financing the renaissance. UTF believes that public money in urban regeneration should be used to attract money from the private sector. The establishment of national public-private investment funds can do this. Introduction of a package of tax measures is also necessary for providing incentives for developers, investors, small landlords, owner-occupiers and tenants to contribute to the regeneration of urban sites and building that would not otherwise be developed (UTF, 1999: 17).

**HOW APPLICABLE IS THE UTF?**

First of all, it needs to be mentioned that this program does not identify the reasons and causes of the decline in the urban areas. Poor quality environments, bad schools, low-grade housing, job losses are accounted as the push factors from the cities, but actually they are the consequence. From the other side, rural areas have strong pull factors, such as cheap housing, better environment and better schools. It is very difficult to solve the problem if the cause is not precisely defined. Since it has been proven that people follow the jobs, and that the process of city decline has started when decentralization of the employment started in the 1970s, UTF failed to connect the process of the urban regeneration with the indispensable creation of the new jobs. Creation of the new jobs has to be in same time with provision of schools for example, if the mistakes made in Docklands want to be overcome.

Another issue, which is not tackled by UTF, is social segregation. Actually, according to the UTF, social segregation will be solved with the mixed use of land. That is the only solution proposed by the UTF. Programs concerned with social exclusion have not been reconciled with urban task program, and this program might even make the process of gentrification easier. Mismatch between young and old people has also been made because it is too expensive for older to live in such new redeveloped areas. The Church of England

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\(^1\) See Houghton, G. and Hunter, C. (1994)
criticized UTF from this point of view. "Upgrading an area has social consequences as established residents find themselves squeezed out with property prices accelerating, and local amenities and services adapt themselves to higher income groups, as the current home price boom in London is proving. Those responsible for taking its recommendations further, and for conceiving the Urban White Paper must look beyond the well designed facades of the riverside to the people. They make up the diverse communities in their shadow and the marginalized estates beyond them, if they are to develop a vision for an urban renaissance that offers the possibility of inclusion, participation, identity and soul in our towns and cities" concluded the bishops (Abrams, 2000).

Urban regeneration requires continuous public consultation and review. They should result in a local agenda, which is special to the particulars of each place. Each town and city will have different characteristics and particular challenges. Anyway, local agendas should have an aspiration to create inclusive communities with included the young, the single, the elderly and all ethnic groups in process of plan creation. Local architectural centers do not seem as the solution to this problem.

UTF promotes sustainable urban development, but the question is what is the most sustainable way? Is it the Compact City approach or development on the brownfield sites?

Development on the brownfield land raises many questions and not only about sustainable nature. Are the brownfield sites in the council areas, what amount of brownfield sites is available and what is the cost? UTF prioritizes the regeneration of towns and cities by building on recycled urban land and protecting of the countryside. But much of this brownfield land is owned by the recently privatized utilities. In London alone Railtrack, British Gas and Deutsche Bank are huge landowners and they own the land that is at the moment classified in their books as derelict and because of that it is often undervalued. If it were to be re-valued as development land it would increase the book value of the companies and thus the profits of these companies. It will also increase the costs of redevelopment of such areas to local authorities. The government should ensure that these re-defined brownfield sites are correctly valued and taxed. In this way there would be more incentive for the landholders to bring them into productive use.

There is also the debate about the percentage green to brownfield land needed. The capacity of urban areas to accommodate more residential units depends upon the densities to build and what types of housing will be produced. As it was mentioned earlier, projections for new development are based 60 per cent on brownfield sites. According to Peter Hall it is not possible, because statistics shows that only 47 percent of brownfield and

11 percent of greenfield land is available for development in south east England, which is equal to 58 but not 60 percent. "Prescott will be lucky if he gets 50 per cent on brownfield sites" (Hall, 2000). If one of the creators of the UTF is skeptical about its implementation and success, how should public feel?

Additional fact which is contradictory to 'successful return to the cities' is that 73 per cent of people in rural areas are satisfied with their life there (Breheny, 2000). How they could be attracted to move to the cities? Would people come to live in the city centers if they know that they can not have garage or parking space on the streets and they want to keep the car they own? Who would actually want to live in these new BS?

Another, very sensitive question is concerned with development in greenbelt, since John Prescott allowed an extension of new towns in protected areas. Prescott said that the key to preventing excessive building on greenfield sites is the development of a new 'linear city' along the Thames from Greenwich east to Dunford and the Medway. He is also keen to expand Ashford, in Kent, into a big new town to serve the Channel tunnel alongside the further expansion of Milton Keynes. In the longer term, building might be allowed along the M11 corridor, around Stansted in Essex. In spite of the fact that the majority of the new development is promised to be on greenfield sites, there are already signs of dissatisfaction of the local residents, especially in Ashford, who believe that their countryside will be ruined forever (Black and Ungood-Thomas, 2000). How sustainable is really the Urban Renaissance?

Another problem is concerned with the power relations between authorities. Local councils within their existing powers have the authority and capacity to deliver urban renaissance. However, some serious obstacles exist. First obstacle can be seen in balance of power between central and local authorities. UTF argues that existing local plans make development too slow. Though they want to encourage longer-term strategic plan making, local frameworks must be regularly reviewed. So often there is a lot of activity in the planning department, and a short-term political strategy to produce a five or ten year 'local plan'. Then it is all frozen until the next one. By the time development programs have reached statutory ratification, they are often out of date.

According to the UTF creators, this infers a new plan making system. These design guidelines would offer consistent urban policies and provide the framework into which each authority can place their own long-term plan. However at the moment the relationship between an up to date PPG and out of date Local Plans is not clear. Therefore, PPGs must be given priority over local plans and there should be change of emphasis from land use to spatial masterplan. The question is does this change lead to top-down system of planning?

Next problem might appear between local authorities and local people. What will happen
if they (local people) wish urban renaissance but not in their backyards, or famous NIMBY syndrome? Problem between planners and architects also could emerge, since the role of planners is not precisely defined, but very confusing. Architects have the leading role in the urban regeneration. Does this program represent a return to physical planning?

The next question is about costs and financing of the program. It is not defined how are those programs going to be financed. Public money has to be put in some brownfield sites in order to attract private investments. But according to Wendy Shillam, public funds are hindered by restrictive attitudes. Both the Housing Corporation and regeneration funders in regional government offices put too much attention on simple numerical achievement, while paying only little attention on quality, flexibility or sustainability. ‘Innovation is not encouraged in fact it is discouraged’ (Shillam, 1999).

Thus that is a situation where neither private, nor social innovators can borrow development finance and the market moves very slowly. This is the major obstacle to either private or public sector to respond adequately to opportunities. Since funding for different schemes is difficult to get, the government must provide incentives and support to broaden development finance opportunities. The lack of easy finance stifles innovative development as much as it can stifle any new business (Shillam, 1999).

**CONCLUSION**

New urban frameworks are the necessity. Cities are declining and people will not invest or return to live in run-down areas unless there is good education, access to a range of cultural and leisure facilities, shopping, good transport links, and economic development. However, physical regeneration, which is offered by UTF is not enough. It must be supported by social and economic regeneration. Beside of the good solutions, like mixed land use and creation of the pedestrian zones, UTF might create more problems, if it does not include social and economic dimension - like social exclusion and gentrification in British cities.

Parallel with Urban Renaissance, Rural Renaissance should also be stimulated. Improvements in public transport and improved access to the towns will be as useful for rural dwellers, as it will be for their urban dwellers. By tackling the urban issues the Government can also strengthen rural areas.

The question is what could be applicable from this concept of renaissance to Serbia, since Serbia is far away from the UK’s level of economic development and from building projects of the Millennium Dome scale.

However, due to the lack of an urban development strategy in Serbia, some of the concepts from UTF can and should be used in further developing a national urban strategy framework. It is very important that instead of the top down approach, which has underlined Yugoslav planning over the last fifty years, a new bottom up approach, base on real economic and social situation, is adopted. Planners have to accept that they are responsible for the creation of new visions and goals, but goals that will be fulfilled instead of remaining ‘dead letter’ like for example Serbia’s 1995 Spatial Plan. Planning should stop being a device for central allocation of economic resources in the hands of the ruling regime as it has been for decades, and new theories, approaches and methodologies should be introduced.

With the new development framework, Belgrade does have a chance to become the most competitive city in the region. This chance is especially enhanced by the fact that Belgrade will be the host city for the European Championship in basketball in 2004. Besides the sport games, many other games, ranging from the attraction of FDI, to city advertisement, and the attraction of global tourism, will have to be played by local authorities and planners.

**Bibliography**

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