The Plotlands Experience:

The Self-Build Settlements of Southeast England

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Travelling on the Eurostar train through London's extensive commuter belt, I have heard the exclamation many times in countless minor variations: 'But the houses are all the same!' The Belgian and French attitudes to the expression of collectivity in housing are diametrically opposed, but whichever way you look at it, the repetition of identical freestanding houses seems a satisfactory expression neither of individuality nor of collectivity.

Although dominant, this is not however the only tradition of suburbia in England. The 'Plotlands', a series of self-built settlements on regular plots, concentrated in the southeast of England, express altogether different values and traditions[1].

The plotlands developed over a seventy year period, starting with the agricultural depression of the 1870s and spreading slowly until a peak of activity in the 1920s and 1930s, until their growth was brought to an abrupt halt by the Second World War. Their development occurred on the basis of several interrelated factors, with what we can now recognise as inexorable tendencies played out over the volatile market conditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The first of these factors was the decline of agricultural prices with Britain's increasing reliance on imports from the colonies. For example, by 1904, India had become Britain's largest supplier of grain[2]. Land with a marginal yield, which had in many cases not long previously been brought into production, was sold off to speculators for development (although it must be added that it was mostly many years before these saw anything like a return on their investment). Thus areas of poor soil, like South Essex, with its heavy clayey soil, or shoreline scrub and saltmarsh, as at Dungeness on the South coast or Humberston Fitties on the North Lincolnshire coast, or drained marshland pasture, as at Canvey Island on the Thames or Jaywick Sands, came into the hands of land agents who subdivided them into rectangular plots for sale.

The second factor was the overcrowding and pollution of the major cities,

which sustained several schools of thought advocating dispersal. Moralists such as William Morris or Richard Jefferies, author of the apocalyptic 'After London' saw the city as a deeply corrupting influence, to escape at all costs. Jack London in 'People of the Abyss' paints a picture of the London working class dropping like flies, needing replacement by the sturdy immigrants from the countryside. A part of the workers' movements saw the resettlement of the land as the solution for the poverty and periodic unemployment of the urban proletariat, echoing Feargus O'Connor's hugely popular platform as leader of the Chartists in the 1840s, when industrial capitalism was barely a generation old in many places, and seemed but a brief, transient phenomenon[3]. The most immediate contributory factor on this count was the progressive reduction of the working week, with half-day work on Saturdays and Bank Holidays: these fed the burgeoning leisure culture, for which this was both a peak period and an age of innocence.

The third factor was the development of mass transport. Where the steamers had established the Thames estuary towns of Southend and Margate for mass tourism, the railways followed, opening up a series of development opportunities at intermediate stops. Such was the origin of the South Essex plotlands, with Laindon and Pitsea on the London to Southend line, and the stop at South Benfleet giving access, albeit via a ferry, or stepping stones at low tide, to Canvey Island. In the case of the inter-war plotlands, the car opened up new possibilities, as at Jaywick Sands on the Essex North Sea coast. Indeed, the mark of the car was so profound that many streets were named after popular marques.

The final factor which permitted the emergence of the plotlands was the absence of either a strict planning framework, or of enforcement of existing regulation of buildings. Local councils employed few enforcement officers for building control, and these seem to have been either half-hearted or tolerant in their interpretation of bye-laws. It was the change in this culture after the Second World War, with increased control on development of the countryside and control and normalisation of standards of building, which proved fatal to the plotlands, and troublesome to the plotlanders.

The result of the geometric layout, ruralist ideals and self-built constructions was a classic if unconventional example of the 'bookkeeping city', as described by Erik Terlouw in OASE 52[4], a geometric subdivision of land into repetitive plots. But depending on the conditions of the site, as well as on the personality of the developer, very different variations of the phenomenon emerged.

Thus Frederick Ramuz of Southend appears to have been a speculator pure and simple, some of his purchases proving solid investments, as at Westcliff in Southend, others, as in Minster on the Isle of Sheppey, seeming foolhardy wagers on the future expansion of London to the bleaker corners of England. In Southend, Ramuz sold to local housebuilders on condition that they built houses of a minimum value of £250, creating what was effectively a conventional suburb; in more marginal locations, these restrictive covenants were replaced with the assurance to prospective buyers: 'Cheap Iron or Wood Bungalows allowed!'.

As well as speculators, the plotlands were developed by an assortment of chancers, philanthropists and fantasists. At Jaywick Sands, Frank Stedman had to use various ruses - six bedroom timber 'beach huts'whose construction thecouncil sanctioned, as long as they were not used for sleeping in - in order to realise his dream of a 'seaside garden suburb'. Having started this new settlement he exerted much of his energies to defend the interests of the owners against Clacton council's unpredictable mix of collusion and disapproval.

At Canvey Island, a development opportunity which the canny Ramuz had passed up was embraced and promoted with great enthusiasm by Frederick Hester, 'to meet the requirements of London's teeming and toiling millions'[5]. As the first constructions started, he commissioned a relentlessly upbeat History of Canvey Island which enthused: 'Certain it is that the hitherto

obscure and almost forgotten little Island.... is destined to witness a grand and immediate transformation'[6]. Hester's plans were indeed grand, and they were put into immediate effect: a tramway was built, with carriages marked 'Venice-on-Sea and Canvey', and a Wintergarden was started, which was to be 'an elegant glass structure, planted with choice fruit trees, flowering shrubs, and climbers, intersecting the whole island'. However, Hester's ambitions were not compatible with the income from incremental repayments on the small plots, and with only (only) two thousand of the projected ten thousand metres of Wintergarden completed, he was declared bankrupt in 1905, and the tramway and wintergardens were dismantled.

Whatever the motivations and sales pitch of the developers, the plotlands quickly took on a life and character of their own. The tolerant attitude to what was built was answered with an assortment of shacks, converted boats and railway trucks, and lovingly fabricated summerhouses. Plotowners elevated bricolage to new heights, as in the case of the London joiner who built his plotlands residence with discarded mahogany joinery from City of London banks.

If we consider the more conventional suburban developments of the inter-war period, the peculiar qualities of the plotlands become more apparent. With no money for homogeonising earth-moving or landscaping, the existing topography was barely altered by the primitive roads and lightweight timber houses. The diversity of motivations of the different owners was expressed in the use of the gardens as well as the form of the houses. While some established carefully tended flowers and shrubs, others kept goats, geese chickens or bees, or grew fruits and vegetables. Indeed, with the Great Depression and the Second World War, the produce from the plots enabled a number of inhabitants to be virtually self-sufficient. The natural diversity of the plotlands were further enhanced by the undeveloped plots, left unsold or whose owners had bought the deeds in one of the infamous boozy 'plot sales' auctions, taken them home and forgotten about them. The houses were thus interspersed with areas of ground in a semi wild state, the whole forming a diverse ecological mix, aptly named by Hardy and Ward a 'makeshift landscape'.

Not everyone saw things this way, though, for example the following statement by a town planner: 'A half finished building estate is a depressing place, but infinitely worse is the estate that obviously will never get finished'7. For while residents were deeply attached to these settlements, other users of the countryside were mostly horrified, particularly those with a proprietorial attitude to the landscape, brought up on the arcadian delusions of the English Landscape Garden. Indeed, with hindsight, much of the reaction to the plotlands seems like a competition in snobbery, with the following statement about Canvey fairly representative: 'an abomination....a town of shacks and rubbish....It caters for a particular class of people, and short of total destruction and a new start, little if anything can be done'[8].

There was often profound antipathy within local government to the plotlands, and while they were largely powerless to halt their spread, they invariably did all they could to hinder the viability of the plotlands, by withholding or delaying services or infrastructure. Thus many houses were without water, drainage or gas for several decades. Despite the rates which owners paid to the local authority, it took many years of agitation to achieve even basic services. Adequate roads, and in the case of the low-lying coastal sites, flood defences were often carried out only after the plotlanders agreed to pay a significant portion of the costs.

But it was precisely this conflict with external bodies which served to unite the plotlanders into an active community. For these were settlements for the most part without any more common facilities than a few shops and a station hotel. The seaside plotlands were already a bit different in this sense, Jaywick Sands having its beach cafe sited in the centre of the town like the basilica of a Roman castrum, Canvey Island having its unusual oval concrete cafe building on the sea wall, apparently Ove Arup's first building project when he moved to Britain in the mid 1930s. So the community was built out of both

the shared hedonism of the summer holidays and a shared determination to overcome the brute necessities of inhabiting the plotlands out of season, when coal trucks were unable to deliver in-winter because of the state of the roads, or the only access to water was via a standpipe at the end of the road.

The Second World War and its wake proved a decisive period in the history of the plotlands, with previously fluid battle lines hardening. With the aerial bombing of London in 1940, many Eastenders with plotland houses moved to live there permanently, to escape the danger and supplement rations with homegrown produce. Coastal plotlands such as Jaywick Sands were covered by restrictions on access to non-residents, as part of the defence strategy against seaborne invasion. Thus some plotlands became virtually urban in their intensity of use, others became ghost-towns, to be reinhabited only after the end of the conflict.

The triumph of the Labour Party in the 1945 general election reinforced the tendencies to centralisation and planning inherent in the war economy. The political case for the conservation of the countryside and for public provision of housing was also advanced, and the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act enacted many principles derived from Ebeneezer Howard's Garden City movement[9]. Urban spread was limited by the establishment of rural Green Belts restricting development, and a wave of new town construction was initiated beyond the Green Belts. Local and central government were handed new tools to pursue their antipathy to the plotlands, although official policy was sometimes given a less harsh interpretation at the level of implementation. The creation of new plotlands became an absolute impossibility, and the fate of the existing plotlands ran through a spectrum from elimination through transformation to preservation depending on the degree of official hostility or tolerance.

The plotlands of Pitsea and Laindon in South Essex were targeted by Essex County Council as the site for a New Town, at a time when other County Councils were bitterly resisting the sites designated by central government.

The development of Basildon was commenced in 1952, with its town centre on farmland in the hollow between the higher ground on which the plotlands settlements were predominantly built. Compulsory purchase orders were used to clear the plotlanders off their sites, and though the valuations of the properties were in some cases as derisory as the comments of officials, the general principal was established of offering a newly-built house in the New Town to those vacating their self-built house. Whether through sensitivity or meanness on the part of the authorities, older plotlanders were left relatively undisturbed (though the threat of compulsory purchase always loomed), the Development Corporation preferring to wait until their death for the land to be made free.

Thus within two decades the self-build settlements were cleared, leaving only Laindon Hills and Bowers Gifford at the western and eastern edges in their pre-New Town form. Laindon Hills, a west-facing slope looking back towards London, its streets drily named First, Second, Third and Fourth Avenues, served a second and third generation of Londoners and Basildonians as home or weekend home until the 1980s. Designated as a country park, the council's refusal of permission for alterations or extensions tested the limits of the existing houses and the hardiness of their occupants. Progressively abandoned, the site has 'returned' to a natural state, and is now a mixed woodland with a certain ramshackle beauty, with one house, 'The Haven' preserved as a Plotlands Museum.

Jaywick Sands was protected from development by its geographical and economic marginality. Clacton council's attitude slowly shifted from malign neglect to concern about the living conditions of residents, to the point that the council developed and promoted a pattern-book of extensions suitable to upgrade the dwellings. The area remains stubbornly resistant to development. Indeed when the Guinness Trust (a charitable housing trust) built new housing targeted at the inhabitants of the most run-down properties, these refused, without exception, to move).

A more picturesque example of decline is provided at Dungeness, which has been made famous in recent years by film-maker Derek Jarman, who retired to its spectacular desolation after his diagnosis with AIDS. The garden which he developed there beside his hut, combining the strange beauty of sea-eroded pebbles with sea-edge plants, transforms the makeshift qualities of the plotlands into an atmosphere of strange beauty.

There are many examples of plotlands which evolved slowly, the houses and infrastructure upgraded bit by bit until, as at Canvey Island, it is only possible to discern the origin of the area from the proportion of the plots and the rectilinear street layout. The plotlands houses have in these instances been assimilated to the property market, and, according to Hardy and Ward, have attained values similar to more conventionally developed houses.

While the post-war planning and building framework brought the development of the plotlands to a halt, there has been sporadic self-build activity in Britain over this period. In his fascinating paper 'Slipping through the Cracks: the Origins of Aided Self-Help Housing'[11] Richard Harris records a wave of self-build activity in the immediate post-war period, often organised through housing associations. Unlike the earlier examples in Germany, Austria and Sweden, where support included low interest financing, materials, technical assistance and land on low-interest, long-term leases, government support was half-hearted, doubtless influenced by fierce resistance from the building trades.

The émigré architect Walter Segal became a tireless champion of self-build construction, and developed an adaptable modular design which among other things satisfied Building Control requirements. A group of houses was built in Lewisham, south London in the economic turbulence of the1970s, sponsored by the Local Authority; although received with much interest it was not emulated elsewhere. Colin Ward's campaigning on the issue, inspired by his study of the plotlands and formulated in his lecture 'The Do-It-Yourself New Town'[12], led to a settlement of 14 houses on the margins of Telford New Town; ironically, the success of this venture raised the land value to the extent that the initiators were unable to extend their experiment[13].

The plotlands were the product of highly specific social, economic and political circumstances, many of which have passed, it is therefore tempting to conclude that the plotlands phenomenon is a mere historical curiosity. Their current relevance lies in three directions.

Firstly, with farm incomes at a post-war low despite high levels of agricultural subsidy, a series of 'what if' questions pose themselves. Should urban and rural planning recognise soil productivity rather than geographical proximity to the city centre? Is a golf course 'greener' than a smallholding, even if the latter has a house on it? The dynamics of city and country, and of production and consumption are closely linked; what seems increasingly clear is that large scale agriculture and leisure are not the only way to husband our natural resources.

Secondly, the London dimension. The plotlands evolved in relation to the exceptional dynamics of the capital city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. With growth around the capital continuing, and with new towns now planned in the wider region, albeit at a slightly higher density, it is certain that the investment of 'sweat capital' would open access for house ownership for many who are currently excluded by impossible earnings to house price ratios, as well as opening new avenues of financing for public bodies with strict borrowing restrictions. It is interesting to reflect whether the social cohesion of what will be effectively dormitory towns might be advanced by the shared purpose engendered by self-build. Perhaps the answer to the density issue - the Laindon plotlands had a typical density of 20 houses per hectare while the government is now stipulating a minimum of 30 - might also contribute to the collective experience. Can self-build as a constructional technique and a social phenomenon rise to the challenge of density?

Finally, the plotlands cast an interesting reflection on urban dynamics and the endurance of urban form. Current housebuilding strategies with repeated units in a picturesque layout provide an ironic echo of the Abbe Laugier's dictum, beloved of Le Corbusier: 'Chaos, tumult in the whole; unity in the detail'[14]. The plotlands expose the compensatory nature of picturesque planning - if each house has its own character, the fear of uniform layouts which drives the supply side of the housing market becomes redundant. The assimilated plotlands, as at Canvey Island, have lost much of the architectural distinctiveness of their makeshift early days, but as a mature townscape compare well to developer-built settlements of the same period.

Thus, while the specific circumstances of the plotlands' evolution are now a matter of historical curiosity, the underlying dynamics of individual liberty, community and capital which are strongly imprinted in English society suggest a continued relevance for the lessons of the plotlands.

Footnotes

1 My account of the plotlands draws heavily on Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward's 'Arcadia for All: The Legacy of a Makeshift Landscape', 1984. As well as being a thorough and sympathetic account, it was written when traces of the plotlands were still relatively evident. The progressive disappearance of the plotlands make it likely that this will remain the definitive account.

2 In Ashraf Ghani, 'Space as an Arena of Represented Practices', in Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change, ed. Bird, Curtis, Putnam, Robertson and Tickner, 1993, p53.

3 John Belchem, 'Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain', 1996, p87-90; Eric Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire, 1999, p101-2.

4 Erik Terlouw, 'A House of One's Own' in OASE 52, p32-77.

5 Quoted by Hardy and Ward, Arcadia for All, p121.

6 From Augustus Daly The History of Canvey Island, 1903, quoted by Hardy and Ward, 'Arcadia for All', p120.

7 C. Buchanan, 'Mixed Blessing' 1958, quoted by Hardy and Ward, Arcadia for All, p193.

8 J.A. Steers, 'Report on the East Anglian Coast: Hunstanton to East Tilbury'. Public Record Office, 1943. Quoted in Arcadia for All, p120.

9 See Peter Hall and Cohn Ward, 'Sociable Cities: The Legacy of Ebeneezer Howard', 1998.

10 David Newnham, 'Shifting Sands' in The Guardian, 12 August 2000.

11 Richard Harris, 'Slipping Through the Cracks: The Origins of Aided Self-Help Housing, 1918 -1953', available at www.science.mcmaster.ca/geo/faculty/harris/geography/orig.html.

12 Colin Ward, 'The Do-It-Yourself New Town', in Talking Houses, 1990.

13 Colin Ward, New Town, Home Town, 1993, chapter 11 'A Do-It-Yourself New Town', p125-132.

14 Quoted in Le Corbusier, 'Urbanisme', 1994, p65.