

the regeneration game

development sites and funding infrastructure from those uplifts.

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Notes

- 1 Steven Gjerstad and Vernon L. Smith: 'From bubble to depression'. *Wall Street Journal*, 6 Apr. 2009. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123897612802791281.html>
- 2 Paul Krugman: 'Dubya's double dip?'. *New York Times*, 2 Aug. 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/02/opinion/dubya-s-double-dip.html?scp=4&sq=krugman%20mcculley%20bubble&st=cse>
- 3 Polly Cleveland: 'The Great Real Estate Bubble of the 1920s'. *Dollars & Sense*, 22 Feb. 2009. www.dollarsandsense.org/blog/2009/02/great-real-estate-bubble-of-roaring.html
- 4 See www.archive.org/details/onehundredyearso00hoytrich
- 5 See 'Dr Homer Hoyte: planning's unsung hero'. American Planning Association webpage, at <http://apaeconomicdevelopment.blogspot.com/2009/11/dr-homer-hoyt-plannings-unsung-hero.html>
- 6 Anne Goldgar: *Tulipmania: Money, Honor, and Knowledge in the Dutch Golden Age*. University of Chicago Press, 2007
- 7 Fred Harrison: *Boom Bust: House Prices, Banking and the Depression of 2010*. Shephard-Walwyn Publishers, 2005
- 8 Fred Harrison: 'Bust will follow boom – but when?'. *Money Week*. 5 Aug. 2005. www.moneyweek.com/investments/property/bust-will-follow-boom--but-when.aspx
- 9 See Richard A. Easterlin: *The Reluctant Economist: Perspectives on Economics, Economic History and Demography*. Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.74-81
- 10 David Leonhardt: 'Be warned: Mr Bubble's worried again'. *New York Times*, 21 Aug. 2005. www.nytimes.com/2005/08/21/business/yourmoney/21real.html?_r=1
- 11 Sean O'Grady: 'Tax future house price bubbles, Bank of England tells Treasury'. *The Independent*, 2 Dec. 2009. www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/tax-future-house-price-bubbles-bank-of-england-tells-treasury-1832181.html

off the fence

David Lock on the need not just to retain but also to reinvigorate the NHPAU

fortify the messenger



There is an increasing number of victims in society: people who are the collateral damage of deliberate underplanning for housing, and of the misfit between the location of jobs and the location of homes. This problem matters for high-level humanitarian reasons in a civilised society of course, but also because, when victims are sufficiently harassed, they are likely to start burning the world that hurts them. If this reads like an exaggeration, please look again at – for example – 1982's Scarman Report.¹

As the vague 'new localism' idea promoted by the Conservative Party takes hold (and its appeal seems so wide that it may continue, whatever the results of the 2010 General Election), many of the well-fed, well-housed white middle classes that overwhelm decision-making in local government are already showing excitement at the possibility of stopping housebuilding in its tracks in their area. They relish it, and have already begun to sabotage up-to-date statutory development plans and stall plan-making processes in anticipation of the power they feel is coming their way.

This behaviour is ugly to see, triumphalist in its tone, and offensive in attitude. It will also, of course, increase still further the number and range of victims of underplanning. Some of the victims are already relatives, friends, and neighbours. Many are white and middle class. There is a serious housing problem not far from each of us.

Eventually the underplanning will reap its whirlwind. In the 1950s it was the Conservative Government of Harold MacMillan that promised and achieved 'a million houses' – which took the form of the high-rise slums we are still paying for. In Brixton in 1982 it was fire. We must try to counter underplanning, and hold politicians to the hitherto long-standing cross-party promise that there should be a decent home for all.

One way to counter the underplanners is to publish hard, independent information about the

housing situation in a language and in a form that can be readily grasped. Such data must be presented graphically, widely disseminated and made very easily accessible.

Universities can be considered an independent source of data, but the institutions and the academics within them are obliged increasingly to work when commissioned commercially, and sometimes the people that have the cash and the motivation to buy research have an underplanning agenda.

One source of independent data is the Office for National Statistics. However, this government body does not cut the mustard on housing because the data sets it provides need blending and processing to provide what planning needs. This problem was spotted by Kate Barker in her Review of Housing Supply for the Treasury, in which she recommended that an independent institution should be created for the purpose of informing strategic planning.²

The National Housing and Planning Advice Unit (NHPAU) was the result. It is a non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Communities and Local Government, designated to provide independent advice on affordability matters to the Government, Regional Assemblies and other stakeholders with an interest in the housing market.

'The NHPAU is a national treasure, and it should not only be retained by any future government, but also be more adequately resourced and given a more rigorous brief'

As Kate Barker pointed out, 'affordability' is in part affected by supply, so the NHPAU remit is wider than it might at first appear.

I was pleased to speak effusively in welcome at the launch of this institution. At last we had the prospect of some facts to counter the ducking and diving in which planning authorities (at all levels) had been engaged. Housing numbers to be planned for were being cynically manipulated to be politically acceptable, and were always roughly the median of whatever numbers any interest group (from the Campaign to Protect Rural England to the Home Builders Federation) cared to slap on the table.

The NHPAU is a national treasure, and it should not only be retained by any future government, but

also be more adequately resourced and given a more rigorous brief. It has allowed itself to be seen (by the Conservatives) as part of the 'problem' (and therefore to be abolished) instead of part of the solution (which, to them, ought to be informed localism).

The NHPAU has not been permitted to take a high enough profile, being focused instead on the strategic planning and housebuilding insiders, rather than local councillors and the general public. The scope of its data is limited to the tight (and politically determined) requirements of the planning system. In that sense, it follows rather than leads the way planning is done.³ The presentation of its data is, frankly, dull. Its profile is so low as to be invisible to all but the experts.

A properly re-invigorated NHPAU would be fiercely and strenuously independent and very high profile. It would be the outspoken authority on who needs what housing, where. Its publications would be exemplary in graphic terms (there is so much to learn from the DATAR organisation in France about the presentation of geographical and demographic data). Its use of modern communications media would be sophisticated. Its mission would be to educate. The test would be awareness of its output among school students, and its effectiveness in shaping the thoughts of the well-fed white middle class politicians who think it is clever and even patriotic deliberately to keep people from having a decent home of their own. Shame on them – come on the NHPAU! You are a possible defence against the dark arts of underplanning.

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Notes

- 1 Lord Scarman: *The Scarman Report: The Brixton Disorders 10-12 April 1981*. Pelican Books, 1982
- 2 Kate Barker: *Delivering Stability: Securing our Future Housing Needs. Barker Review of Housing Supply. Final Report – Recommendations*. HM Treasury, 1984. Kate Barker actually proposed the establishment of a Regional Planning Executive to provide public advice to regional planning bodies on the scale and distribution of housing required to meet the market affordability target
- 3 The NHPAU website says rather leadenly: 'Our task is to help make market housing more affordable and to address the trend in the rise in the number of people prevented from getting onto the property ladder. We do this through providing independent advice to both government and regions about the impact of planned housing provision on affordability, as well as researching specific practical and policy issues.' www.communities.gov.uk/nhpau/