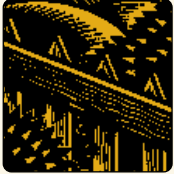


off the fence

Attractive though places such as Stockholm's Hammarby are, the UK eco-towns are having to be conceived in an entirely different social, political and economic culture, says David Lock

unattainable hammarby



In promoting the eco-town initiative and inviting people to make bids to build one (subject to planning permission), the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has made reference to a number of developments which it feels make good case studies or points of reference.

Pictures of them, and favourable remarks about them, have been repeated in various DCLG documents since the initiative was launched, and the Eco-towns Challenge Panel has referred to some of them as if they were benchmarks or yardsticks against which eco-town schemes might be judged. ('How are you going to make your 15,000 homes in the brickfields and rubbish tips of Bedfordshire have public transport that exceeds the quality of Vauban, the 'green' suburb of Freiburg?' challenged an Expert. 'Make Bedford a medieval university city, re-nationalise public transport, elect a social democratic government for over 60 years, raise taxes and stop fighting wars,' I wished I had answered!)

The developments cited most often include Vauban (which is a former military camp) and Hammarby (a suburb developed on a former industrial site in Stockholm, a capital city).

Many of us are enthusiastically visiting these places as fast as time and money permit. The TCPA organised a study tour to Vauban for early September 2008, joining what is now a well beaten path of British property developers and consultants. It is excellent that we are now taking the trouble to widen our horizons, although rather embarrassing that we don't seem to have been making the effort before the DCLG pricked us into it. What have we been putting in our CPD logs? 'Watched *Britain from the Air and Coast* on TV'?

In my own excursion to Hammarby I could see what had taken the fancy of London-based DCLG officials: the tram through the middle of the suburb; the very high densities; the neatness and cleanliness; the high quality of architectural design,



Photos: David Lock

Above

Hammarby – the product of a society that, among other things, 'sees public transport as a public responsibility and a structuring element in development schemes'

the specification of street infrastructure and management of parkland; the priority given to energy conservation and water management; and the impression of civil society in general. It's a pretty perfect place viewed in that way, with healthy, smiling families having picnics on the grass, small children at play in the open communal playgrounds in the centre of all apartment blocks, an absence of graffiti and, one is told, no drug or alcohol abuse problems, no significant crime statistics, and high property prices – and a long waiting list of people wanting to buy in. There is no subsidised housing (the Swedes subsidise the people in need, not the property). It is photogenic, welcoming, and stylish.

What is depressing is that we could not create such a place in the UK. It is not a 'model' or 'precedent' for eco-town development and, dear Challenge Experts, it is certainly not a benchmark or yardstick.

The site was assembled by the Swedish government, who owned most of it anyway. The Swedish taxpayer paid for the remediation of the former industrial land, which was heavily polluted. The government paid for the installation of the tram system at the start of the development, and the



municipal network of ordinary buses, ferries and metro are all timetabled and networked to connect. Such public intervention and such integrated transport planning is impossible in most of England.

The high densities are possible in Hammarby because of excellent management of the buildings and the public domain; very close proximity to work in central Stockholm; ample availability of competing lower-density suburbs not far away (i.e. this is a niche development, not a one-size-fits all project); and excellent multi-modal public transport, cycling

So Hammarby teaches us that a civil society that is willing to pay high taxes that are not blown away fighting wars, and which respects and supports a dynamic municipal sector in urban regeneration and which sees public transport as a public responsibility and a structuring element in development schemes, is able to create a high-density, high-quality place that will attract some wealthy people who will be able to cope with it because of the high quality of life and the ease with which they can escape when they need to. Phew! Our little free-standing eco-towns have to be conceived in an entirely different social, political and economic culture.

The people actually running the development of Hammarby said that, no, they didn't know they were a UK Government case study and, no, they hadn't met any officials. There is no in-depth independent appraisal, and no substantial objective or comparative assessment material currently published for a UK audience. We are all making superficial judgements, and mine made me depressed about our culture.

I watched the man fitting the exquisite grey granite kerb stones, of a quality I have not seen since Central Milton Keynes was finished in the 1990s. 'Ssssh!' he said. 'Hammarby is supposed to be a sustainable development, but this granite comes all the way from China. It was a lot cheaper. Don't tell anyone!' I began to feel more at home.

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and walking connections. It also helps that you can walk and cycle into a national park which literally adjoins the scheme and that, like most Swedes, many Hammarbians have summer cabins further away into which they can move when necessary to enjoy space, nature and fresh air. There are excellent schools, and the healthcare systems appear to be exemplary. And above all else, the people are civilised and communitarian in their behaviour, and appear to be gentle and courteous in their dealings one with another.