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BEYOND THE FRINGE: THE ROLE OF RECREATION IN MULTI-FUNCTIONAL URBAN FRINGE LANDSCAPES

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Abstract: This paper reviews some of the academic literature and policy documents that relate to and promote the need for urban design and the re-invigoration of the processes and practices of 'masterplanning'. Specifically, this paper concerns the implications for recreation in areas that have been conceptualised in a number of ways including 'urban fringe' and 'fringe-belt' and the ways in which these areas are being re-developed as multi-functional spaces in the planning process. The paper pays particular attention to the proposed development of the 'North Plymouth Community Park' examining the claims made for the sustainable characteristics of the development and questioning the absence of the cultural aspects of recreation.

Key Words: *recreation, planning, fringe-belt, urban.*

Introduction

There are areas of towns and cities that have been relatively neglected by planning processes and by academic study. The nomenclature of these areas is a source of contestation with the terms 'fringe-belt' (Conzen 1960, Whitehand and Morton 2006), 'urban fringe' (Gallent et al. 2004) and 'edgelands' (Shoard 2002, 2003) being employed to describe and allow for the conceptualisation of particular sorts of landscape that share features. Conzen et al. (2013) review this literature and state that "…(r)esearch on fringe belts remained of largely academic interest until the late 1990s, at which time the connection between the research idea and the practice of planning began to receive increasing attention" (Conzen et al. 2013: 36). The academic and policy reasons behind these differences in terminology are explored in the paper later but Conzen et al. (2013: 36) succinctly capture the reason for engaging in this process of theorising: "(t)he practical significance of the fringe-belt idea lies in its potential to clarify and reinforce the rational and cultural basis for understanding the urban landscape as the meaningful outcome of general and place-specific historico-geographical development" (Conzen et al. 2013: 36). This paper uses the 'fringe-belt' idea to understand and examine the specific geographic developments in the city of Plymouth in the United Kingdom as a case study and argues that the role of recreation requires greater attention in the academic and planning literature.

When Natural England produced its review of the work of the Countryside in and Around Cities (CIAT) initiative in 2006 the term Green Infrastructure (GI) was promoted. One of the significant features of Green Infrastructure is the scope for recreation, it is claimed. This paper explores the characteristic features of this infrastructure as well as the reasons why local government has been obliged both to audit this infrastructure and to play an active role in its development. Before doing this, it is necessary to outline some of the key features of the recent transformation of urban landscapes generally and the claims made for the need for the planning and design of areas that have, to some extent, not been subjected to planning processes in the past.

According to Madanipour (2006) there has been a growing appreciation from central government in Britain that urban design deals, not just with appearances, but with the organization of urban space and the processes that take place within those spaces. Thus, design addresses "the way places work as well as how they look" (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2005: 23, quoted in Madanipour 2006: 178). This growing appreciation has led to new approaches in urban design and planning that are starting to transform spaces that were previously neglected by urban planning, approaches that may lead to the formalisation of spaces and have particular consequences for recreation.

The Transformation of Urban Landscape and Green Spaces

To understand the emerging significance of the 'fringe-belt' or 'urban fringe' in the early 21st century it is important to recognise some of the major features of the transformation of cities generally. The balance of the population at a global level has shifted towards cities as the majority of the world's population now live in them and, although the population of Britain is relatively stable, there has been a shift towards urban living alongside a general ageing of the population. Conzen et al. (2013: 36) state that "(u)rban landscapes are changing at an unprecedented pace in most parts of the world" and argue the case for more case studies in urban morphology to enhance understanding of these dynamic landscapes. The response of local governments to the economic and social changes of the cities that they represent has taken place in a period of general withdrawal of direct state involvement. During a period of neo-liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, the response of local governments in Britain generally to the structural changes to the economic base of Britain was muted, one manifestation of which was the lack of planning by those whose roles include the regulation of cities:

> "Planning and design at the urban scale seemed to be entirely within the remit of the government. However, as the state started to withdraw from many of its activities, retreating into a regulatory role, urban development became mainly a task for the private sector" (Madanipour 2006: 177).

Many urban areas on the fringe of cities were developed in this period of private sector led development, development that was often piecemeal. For the purposes of this paper, the features that are of interest are that some urban areas feature a significant amount of green space that may be utilised for recreation and, further, that some areas may have suffered as a result of not being designed for human residence. However, for Whitehand and Morton (2006: 2047), "...(t)he imprint of the late 19th and early 20th centuries on the character of the urban fringe remains strong, many urban fringes are being subjected to increased pressure for change, including redevelopment for housing".

Defining Urban Fringes

Natural England (2007) estimates that the urban fringe around towns and cities accounts for more than 20% of the land area of England. The Countryside In and Around Towns programme (CIAT), adopted by Natural England, suggests the need for a strategic approach to maximise the best uses of its resources, and to contribute towards sustainable development.

For Gant et al. (2011: 266), the notion of the rural/urban fringe first appears in the 1930s when geographers and planners in the United Kingdom voiced concerns about the loss of productive agricultural land to urban growth and led to forms of statutory intervention in land

use planning to restrict ribbon development and the first attempts to create green belts around cities in the 1930s, initially (Gant et al. 2011: 266). They go on to mark Conzen's definition from 1960 of the fringe-belt as a significant intervention in the emergence of morphological analysis:

> "…originating from the temporarily stationary but slowly advancing edge of a town and composed of a characteristic mixture of land use units initially seeking a peripheral location' (Conzen 1960: 125, quoted by Gant et al. 2011: 266).

The urban fringe or fringe belt is "planning's last frontier" according to Griffiths (1994: 14, quoted in Gallent et al. 2004) arguing that areas abutting towns and cities have been largely neglected by land-use planning and by those agencies, public and private, with direct or indirect planning responsibilities. These fringe areas have, nevertheless, developed with some shared features including un-neighbourly functions such as sewage farms, reclamation sites, recycling centres and energy sub-stations as well as business parks, leisure 'parks' (Evans and Foord 2008) and golf courses. For Shoard (2002: 117), this is the unique landscape of the edgelands:

> "…often vast in area, though hardly noticed, it is characterized by rubbish tips and warehouses, superstores and derelict industrial plant, office parks and travellers' encampments, golf courses, allotments and fragmented, frequently scruffy, farmland. All these heterogeneous elements are arranged in an unruly and often apparently chaotic fashion against a background of unkempt wasteland frequently swathed in riotous growths of colourful plants, both native and exotic."

Such areas are, therefore, multi-functional in contrast to the mono-industrial character of the rural countryside that developed following the Second World War. This, for Shoard (2002) is down to the rural planning in Britain which has seen a move away from the multi-use of space to single use. Lowenthal and Prince (1965: 185) recognised, some time ago, that the urban fringe exists without the sense of orderliness and intimacy that the English favour as their rural idyll, areas that are "...tamed and inhabited, warm, comfortable, humanized".

Gant et al. (2011) argue that even the efforts by authorities to create green belts has not led to the expected or intended outcome, "…(d)espite the attempt to preserve rurality and create a green 'lung' for the city… the creation of Green Belts has neither created an entirely satisfactory edge to the city nor is it really correct to label this edge as green" (Gant et al. 2011: 267) as their case study of Shepperton illustrates. There is, however, something noteworthy in the guidelines produced by the Department of Communities and Local Government in 1995 when outlining the objectives of green belts. This lies in the emphasis on the role of green belt areas in providing opportunities for outdoor recreation and sport.

The urban fringe emerged during a hiatus in the growth of built-up areas and became embedded as towns and cities assumed their growth around them. Urban fringes are significant in the understanding of urban development not least because they have distinct physical characters even though these areas were largely ignored by planning processes. However, since the turn of the last century in particular, these urban fringe areas have become of increasing significance to a range of different groups. Personal responses have been recorded by both psychogeographers and poets (Farley and Roberts 2011) making claims for

the beauty of derelict and neglected spaces.

But it is in the economic development of urban fringes that the causes of transformation may be located. The growing commercialisation of public services including higher education, the health service and recycling has changed the value of the urban fringe as well as the increasing pressure from central government for an increase in the housing stock. The UK government's Communities Plan revolves around the development of hundreds of thousands of new homes, both inside cities and outside them in new settlements and towns.

Whitehand and Morton (2006) also note the increasing concern for the protection of sites of ecological significance as canals, former railway lines (now re-invented as linear parks), golf courses and small areas of woodland. Such areas may be re-assessed for their contribution to the requirement of sustainable forms of development.

Green Infrastructure and Green space strategies

Green infrastructure is a term that has emerged to capture a range of different types of spaces but they are located in largely urban areas and embrace spaces traditionally managed or monitored by local authorities such a cemeteries, parks and recreational areas as well as informal green spaces often found on the urban fringe. The Countryside Agency and Groundwork (2005: 18) have outlined the social functions of such spaces: "…(t)he countryside in and around towns forms a vital part of sustainable towns and cities. It inspires urban living that is connected to nature, to the countryside and reflects responsibilities to the wider environment".

They list a series of policy drivers including climate change, housing, renewable energy, housing, transport, health and education but not recreation explicitly, although recreation may be inferred from the priority given to health. The multifunctionality of green infrastructure is highlighted in the following list of attributes (The Countryside Agency and Groundwork 2005):

- A gateway to the town.
- A health centre.
- A classroom.
- A recycling and renewable energy centre.
- A productive landscape.
- A cultural legacy.
- A place for sustainable living.
- An engine for regeneration.
- A nature reserve.

This list does not prioritise recreation but it may be inferred from the term "health centre":

> "As the programme has developed, so too has the concept and credibility of Green Infrastructure (GI). GI describes the processes by which new and existing green spaces and green networks are properly planned, designed and integrated into town and country planning in a strategic fashion. Delivery of multifunctionality and GI have frequently overlapped and provided mutually beneficial opportunities for promoting their related principles." (The Countryside Agency and Groundwork 2005).

Strategies for green infrastructure have emerged in a number of regions frequently informed by GIS modelling exercises to provide the data and evidence of the multifunctionality of spaces. According to the CIAT document, this work is challenging in terms of the assessment of the data that are generated.

The role of GIS modelling is evident in the development of the Greenspace strategy for Plymouth as it embraces the use and application of GIS data. The claim is that such data inform an analysis of access to green space as well as educational opportunities and other indicators of a pleasant living environment. The analysis becomes part of the creation of Local Development Frameworks.

The use of this data, in the example of the GreenSpace Strategy for Plymouth, leads to a rationalisation of the use of space based on a series of assumptions about the health and social benefits of green spaces but also on the basis that such spaces will contribute to 'global cooling' and other claims about sustainable forms of living. And, crucially, the establishment of protected areas of green space inhibits the use of the land for other purposes as Jenkins and Pigram (2006) have noted: "Despite the attraction of the concept, experience in major world cities suggests that the protection of a permanent zone of Greenspace is difficult in the face of compelling pressures to maximise economic use of valuable land (2006: 198)."

Plymouth's Green Space Strategy

The Green Space Strategy for Plymouth (Plymouth City Council 2009) brings together has a number of policy drivers including sustainability and health but the significance of recreation is aired in the foreword:

> "Plymouth's green spaces are places where people can relax, enjoy nature, take children to play or take part in sport or recreation. They are essential for the health and well-being of the City. However, there is more that can be done to improve the quality of Plymouth's green spaces so that more people can visit and enjoy them." (Plymouth City Council 2009: foreword)

The strategy sets out proposals to ensure that green spaces become more accessible and safe, proposals based, it is claimed, on the basis of detailed research into the existing quality of green spaces combined with the results about the ways in which local people view such spaces. One underlying assumption is that the natural environment provides the function of escape from the stresses of everyday (urban) life.

The assessment of the quantity and quality of green space in Plymouth led to the planning prescription that there should be 5.09 hectares of green space per 1,000 of population and that this prescription is made up of a breakdown of green space into four categories: informal Green Space; parks and gardens; local nature reserves and natural green spaces. This means that as the population of the city grows so does the need to provide green space. The research – in the form of consultation exercises and questionnaires – into the perceptions and uses of green spaces found that 45% of people take less than 5 minutes to reach their preferred green space, 26% take between 5 and 10 minutes and 18% take up to 15 minutes (Plymouth City Council 2009). Significantly, the majority of people will walk up to five minutes to access a green space but fewer will walk if a green space is more than a five minute walk away. This led to a key aim of the strategy which is to ensure that people do not have to walk more than 400 m to their nearest green space and not more than 600 m to

their nearest play space. The prescriptions in the green space strategy recognise the established behaviours of the residents of the city alongside the existing quantity and quality of the spaces and are encoded in the statutory approaches to land use in the form of local development frameworks. The statutory element of the local development frameworks produces a comparison to the discretionary character of other forms local authority provision of recreation. The strategy becomes an example of the sort of planning referred to by Veal as 'fixed standard' approach' (2010: 162) in which a prescribed level of provision is offered typically against the level of population – not unlike the approach of 'Fields in Trust' (formerly the National Playing Fields Association) alongside a catchment approach based upon the distances people have to travel to gain access to a facility. The basis of this sort of planning is the principle of equity.

In this strategy, prescriptions are made on the modernist principle that the behaviour of people may be modified, in this case by increasing access to services. The need to allow people to walk to the green spaces will have a significant impact on the urban fringe of Plymouth as the strategy is implemented, in particular with the planning and rationalisation of a significant area to the north of the city. The north of the city is covered by the Derriford and Seaton Area Action Plan which includes the development of a major new accessible green space on what is currently inaccessible farmland. This farmland exists within the urban fringe but also stretches down a valley meaning that a number of residential areas are close by. Seventy hectares of new accessible green space are to link with the existing Local Nature Reserves and be within walking distance of a significant number of local people currently not catered for. In Figure 1, the Green Space Strategy Diagram, the position of Plymouth is shown with the

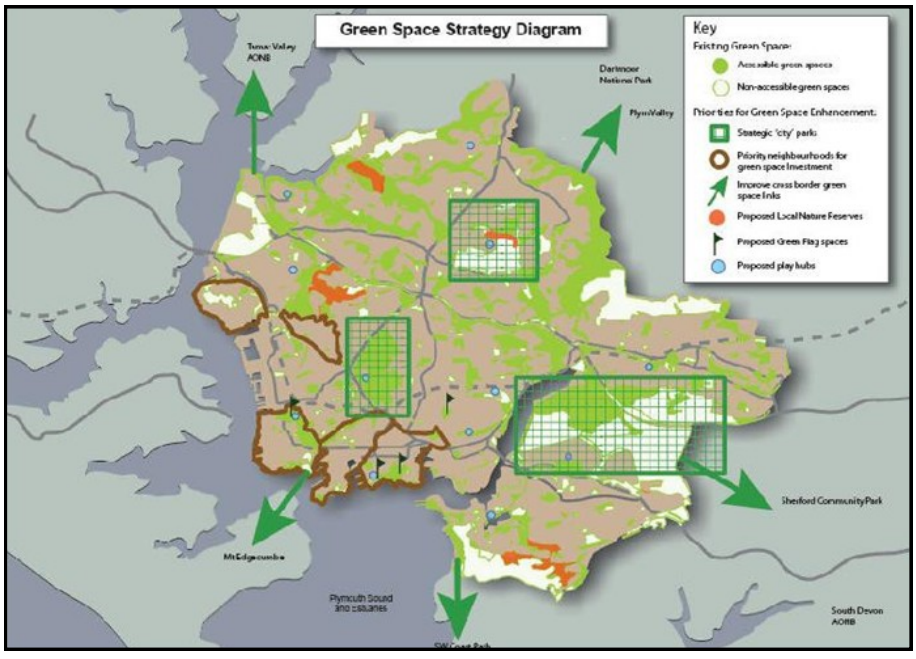

Fig. 1 - **The Green Space Strategy Diagram**

national park of Dartmoor to the north of the city and the Tamar Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to the west. The waterfront area adjacent to Plymouth Sound was, historically, the area to urbanise first with development to the north of the city fairly piecemeal until after World War Two. The proposed North Plymouth Community Park is represented in the upper gridded square.

In Figure 2, the proposed park is labelled as 'North Plymouth Community Park' although the name may change to 'Derriford Community Park'. This figure highlights the manner in which the park abuts several residential areas with the intention that a number of access points allow residents to gain access within the short time that is habitual according to the data. Informal recreation is an intended outcome of provision but the planning allows for the provision of food production in the form of community farms, areas designed to enhance biodiversity and opportunities for education either informally with the farms or more formally if outdoor classrooms can be developed. For this paper, one important feature is that these areas are designed to be multifunctional and constitute a move away from the mono-functionality of farms and some existing formal green spaces.

Brandt (2003) argues that landscapes perform five basic functions and have an inherent capacity to be multi-functional. Their breakdown of the five functions highlight recreation either explicitly or implicitly: ecological functionality, meaning that landscape is an area for living for both human and non-human life; economic functionality, meaning areas for production; sociocultural functionality, or areas for recreation and identification; historical functionality, or areas which offer a sense of sociocultural continuity; and aesthetic functionality, with landscapes providing areas for experiences. The community park referred to in Figure 2 has the capacity to perform the ecological, sociocultural and aesthetic functionalities from Brandt's formulation and to offer them on the basis of equity. It is also possible that such provision may relieve the pressure of use of other areas including the nearby Tamar Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Dartmoor National Park.

Conclusion

This paper takes as its starting point the renewal of interest in town planning given the resurgence of urban design as identified by Madanipour (2006). The paper develops an analysis of the ways in which recreation is 'carried along' in the process of the establishment of green space strategies using Plymouth in England as a case study. There are features in this case study that are of more general interest and application to other areas. A key feature is the use of modernist principles to specify the availability of green space in terms of the distances that people must walk in order to gain access. This amounts to a significant intervention by the local government in terms of recreational planning and makes a behavioural assumption that residents will change their lifestyles and habits if the supply of green spaces is improved. Although recreation is not the principal focus of green space strategies, the significance for recreation should not be diminished. Veal (2010) notes that, "in general, the statutory land-use planning system, because of its statutory basis, remains the most powerful form of planning and one of the most effective means of securing and implementing policies" (Veal 2010: 179). Section Nine of the National Policy Planning Framework in the United Kingdom (2012) specifies that local government must protect 'Green Belts' within their jurisdiction and to provide for outdoor sport and recreation but there is no equivalent obligation for the recreational uses of green space. The recreational use of green space is not specified in the framework. Local government has the discretion to develop green space.

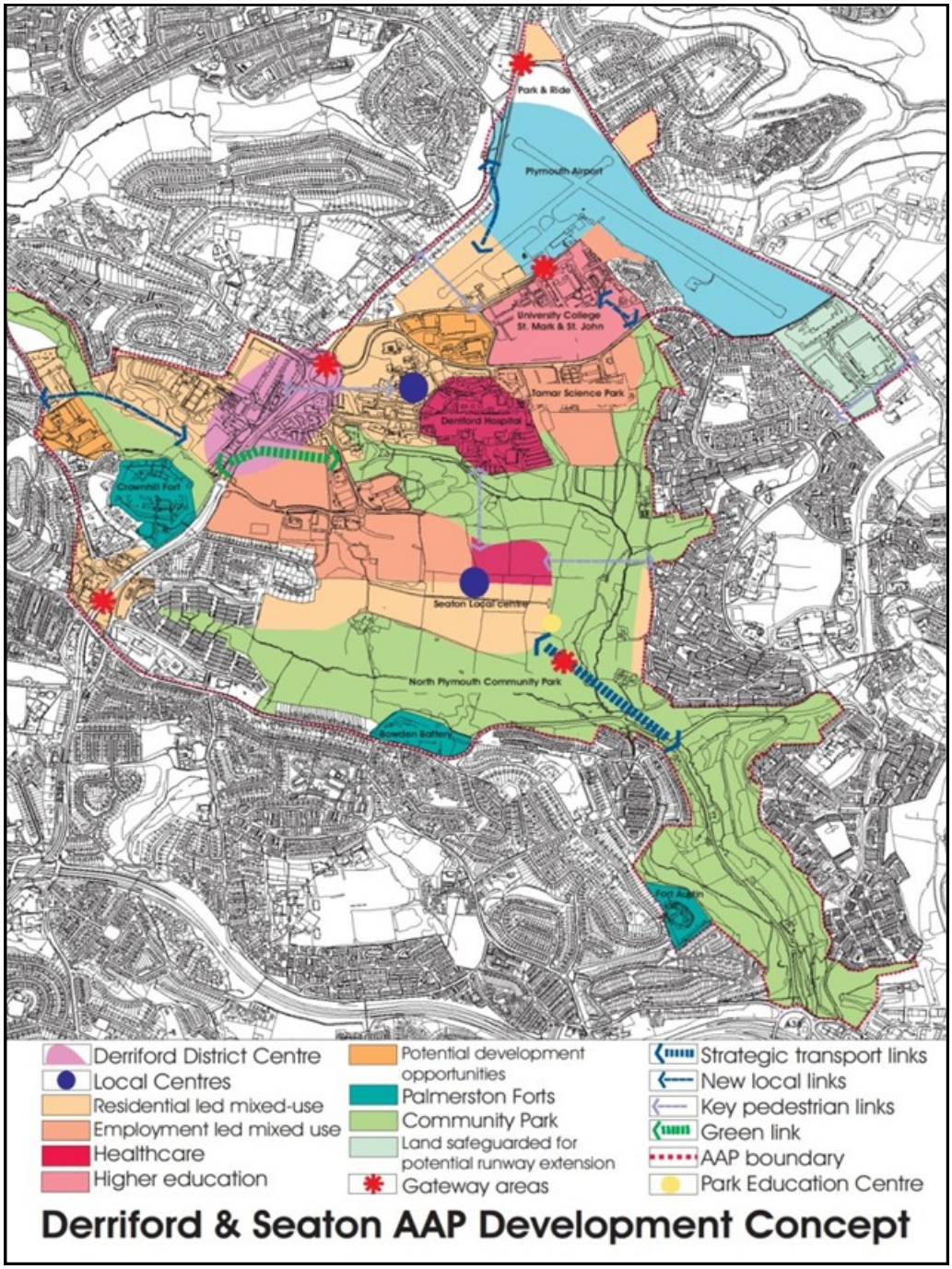

Fig. 2 - **Derriford and Seaton Area Action Plan**

The Plymouth case study is illustrative of the opportunity that local government may make in relation to their commitments for the provision of outdoor recreation alongside the need to enhance landscapes and to improve derelict land. There is a particular relevance for the agencies of local government, many of which are in the process of changing their commitments to discretionary services and adapting to diminishing budgets. If proposals for the use of green space can survive the scrutiny of central government in Britain then these areas may become valuable resources for recreation as well as being protected from the sorts of development activity common to the urban fringe such as noxious industries, waste disposal and business parks. The likes of Farley and Roberts (2011) and Meades (2010) might bemoan the formalization of these informal spaces with their derelict beauty, accidental collisions of function and untidiness but they may, at least, improve as places to live.

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