RSA Journal
Issue 1 2023

RSA

The future is a place

Madeline Ashby on the challenges of building a better tomorrow

Marvin Rees discusses the role of city leaders and the RSA's Urban Future Commission

Nicola Bacon on the importance of 'belonging' to our local areas

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"From the global to the hyper-local, placemaking has never been more important"

The RSA is in the regeneration game. Its mission is the regeneration of people, place and planet. This edition of *RSA Journal* explores the role of place and placemaking in generating the resilient, rebalanced and regenerative communities we will need if people and planet are to flourish. Effective placemaking is a core component of our Design for Life mission, which aims to unlock the opportunity in people through innovative, place-based interventions.

The centrepiece of those interventions is our Urban Futures Commission (UFC), launched earlier this year in conjunction with Core Cities UK and Lloyds Bank. The RSA has a rich history in this area through its earlier City Growth Commission, but large structural gaps remain across the UK. Co-Chair of the UFC, Bristol City Mayor Marvin Rees, observes that these gaps "were always there to be seen if people chose to see them". The task now is to close these gaps and unlock the potential of the UK's major cities.

The RSA's Jamie Cooke, writing with Fellows Lolita Jackson and Grant Ervin, offers insights into the unique relationship between sister cities Glasgow in Scotland and Pittsburgh in the US. Both cities have a long and distinguished industrial past, followed by a protracted period of post-industrial decline, and both are now reinventing and regenerating for the 21st century. They are exemplars of levelling up in practice.

Whether revitalising a post-industrial US city or developing a new skyline in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, building the places of the future requires inspiring architects such as Rami el Samahy. Here, he explores the importance of vision and community participation in the process of developing building guidelines. Closer to home, Alistair Barr of architects Barr Gazetas shares important lessons from King Charles's model housing developments in Nansledan, Cornwall and Poundbury, Dorset.

It is increasingly recognised that community participation should be at the core of placemaking. Practitioner Cara Courage argues that, for true 'placemaking' to occur, local people must be equal partners in setting the vision, and regeneration efforts should be artist-led. We showcase public-placed art in the form of David Goldblatt's 'Periodic Table of a Feasible Utopia', the core of a public art installation in Bristol.

Nicola Bacon of Social Life draws on research to explore how a sense of belonging affects people's attachment to place. Cohousing consultant Salla Korpela took a leap of faith when setting out to build a communal home for her extended family and friends. Stories like hers show that 'home' has no fixed definition, a view shared by author Suad Aldarra, who in our 'Last Word' reflects on the meaning of 'home' when the home you knew no longer exists.

A key theme of many of these pieces is the importance of reimagining the communities in which we live. Yet people find it hard collectively to imagine a better future and far easier to imagine a worse one, especially at times of uncertainty. Futurist and science fiction author Madeline Ashby explains why, reflecting the question the RSA is asking in 2023: "What could go right?"

Finally, Sean Kline (US Future of Work Director for the RSA) and Jim Pugh (co-director of the Universal Income Project) discuss the Benefits Access and Equity initiative in California; Professor Mercedes Bustamante details what we can expect from the newly elected government in Brazil when it comes to protections for the Amazon; and Clare Gage FRSA reflects on her experience developing Create Change Chesterfield in her hometown.

From the global to the hyper-local, placemaking has never been more important. The inspiring real-world examples discussed in this edition of *RSA Journal* should give us hope that lasting change is possible if we approach placemaking with imagination and ambition in a way that is human-centred and planet-conscious.

Andy Haldane is Chief Executive Officer at the RSA

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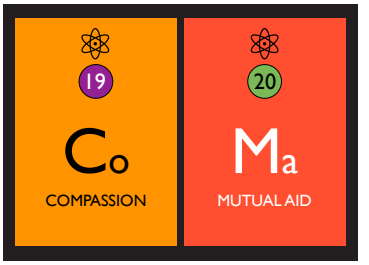

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We are the RSA

The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. Where world-leading ideas are turned into world-changing actions.

The RSA has been at the forefront of significant social impact for over 260 years. Our proven change process, rigorous research, innovative ideas platforms and unique global network of changemakers work together to enable people, places and the planet to flourish.

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We unite people and ideas in collective action to create opportunities to regenerate our world.

We are

A unique global network of changemakers enabling people, places and the planet to flourish.

RSA

Design for resilience

Now more than ever, our capacity to survive, adapt and flourish relies on designing a future that is both sustainable and resilient. This was the core message of Jo da Silva, Chief Executive at Arup, who gave the 2022 lecture at the RSA's annual Royal Designer for Industry (RDI) awards.

Jo delivered her remarks to an audience that included this year's winners – Anab Jain, Jon Ardern, Sebastian Cox, John Warwicker, Jenny Beavan (OBE), Stefan Diez, Andrea Trimarchi, Simone Farresin, and Diébédo Francis Kéré – who come from a range of established and emergent practices. The RDI awards celebrate their positive impact, through design, on society and the environment.

Jo spoke about the changing nature of design and the need for speculative and regenerative thinking. In the 1980s, design did not consider people, place or planet. Later, it was something extractive, seeking only to harness the power of technology to benefit human beings. We now know that our capacity to survive, adapt and flourish relies on designing a future that is concurrently sustainable and resilient. Jo argued that, if design is to make us more resilient, this means that designers must consider not only what impact they will have now, but also 35 years into the future. "Unless we can create resilience through design in individuals, particularly in children, we're not going to be able to navigate the bumps in the road ahead," she said.

To read more about each of the 2022 Royal Designers for Industry, visit https://bit.ly/3ZLGVEU

Action

Rethinking education

How might education be rethought in the face of the challenges and opportunities presented by technology? This question was posed by RSA Chief Executive Andy Haldane in a major speech in January 2023.

Most research suggests that technology will cause significant changes to a majority of jobs over the next few decades. In the face of this profound jobs and skills transition, however, we should not overlook the vast opportunities new technologies present educationally.

Thus far, the main constraints on learning have been hard ones, such as numbers of teachers and schools. Technology has begun to loosen these constraints and will do so to an increasing extent in future.

For example, AI means that completely personalised learning, fine-tuned to our individual learning styles, is now well within our grasp. This could be potentially transformative for how we teach and learn, unlocking the potential of many more people.

The rest of the 21st century will need a system shift for education and learning, the like of which we probably have not seen for a century or more.

To read Andy's comments in full, visit https://bit.ly/3jia4r1

Arts in the spotlight

Creativity

Since 2020, Kari Marken, FRSA, has taught 'Creativity', a required course in many of the master's programmes offered at UBC Sauder School of Business in Vancouver, Canada. "The title of the course sparks both curiosity and critique from students," says Kari, a lecturer in UBC's Law and Business Communications and Entrepreneurship and Innovation Groups. "They enter the class with assumptions and, in many cases, resistance." Kari invites the students to transform the lecture-hall-style classroom into a theatrical set, a design studio and a hands-on workshop. "By starting with questions about place, space and shared purpose in how we gather and work together, we shift the conversation away from unhelpful debates about creative identity (who is or isn't 'creative') and towards refining our skills and taking professional responsibility for how we lead and notice creative process in others."

RSA Insights

£145

The weekly amount of Universal Basic Income payment for an adult needed to eradicate poverty and immediately avoid or delay tens of thousands of cases of anxiety and depression, per an exploration led by the University of Northumbria in partnership with the RSA which found that a UBI designed to meet minimum income standards would avoid or delay over 500,000 cases of anxiety and depression among young people in a 10-year period.

To read the full report, visit thersa.org/reports/universal-basic-income-ubi-mental-health

24%

The percentage of adults who "do not identify as confident learning new things", according to a new RSA report, "Rebalancing adult learning" conducted in partnership with independent charity Ufi VocTech Trust. The report illuminated the needs, motivations and barriers to learning of those furthest from the traditional learning context, concluding that learning experiences that build identity and social capital are vital to learner confidence.

To read the full report, visit thersa.org/reports/rebalancing-adult-learning-report-rsa-ufi

3,417

The number of new Fellows brought into the RSA from across the globe (73 countries) in 2022, following a successful overhaul of the Fellowship application (now the leading channel to recruit Fellows) to make it more transparent, inclusive and easily accessible. 2022 was the best year for recruitment and retention of Fellows in the last three years, and RSA Fellowship has now grown to 31,009, the highest number on record.

To apply for Fellowship, visit thersa.org/fellowship/join

Agenda

The butterfly effect of biomimicry

In November 2022, the RSA awarded eminent biologist Janine Benyus, pioneer of biomimicry, its annual Bicentenary Medal in recognition of her remarkable contribution to regenerative design.

Biomimicry is a discipline that emulates nature's designs and processes to create a healthier, more sustainable, and regenerative planet. It recognises that, as Janine put it, "The natural world has been doing so many of the things we need to do to live more sustainably and equitably, and in ways that have allowed life to flourish for billions of years."

Janine's seminal 1997 book, *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*, encourages innovators to consider, at the moment of creation: how does nature solve this? This premise has inspired countless ideas that draw on the genius of nature to overcome challenges in a sustainable and regenerative way. Almost all biomimicry-inspired design is pioneering and regenerative, and spans a multitude of sectors, from medicine to fashion. Examples include solar cells that mimic leaves, bullet trains that use aerodynamics inspired by kingfishers, and surfaces that emulate the skin pattern of Galapagos sharks to repel bacteria, among many others.

Janine has dedicated her life to encouraging sustainable innovation inspired by nature. In accepting her medal, Janine called on innovators everywhere to learn from nature to design products, processes and policies that support and create conditions conducive to life.

Fellowship

New Fellows

Sarah Burrows is the founder and CEO of Children Heard and Seen, a charity that delivers targeted support to children and families impacted by parental imprisonment. Sarah founded the charity in 2014 after recognising, from her work in the criminal justice system, that there was a need to "offer dedicated support to vulnerable children and young people with a parent in prison". The charity has supported over 700 children since its founding.

Dr Deon Cloete is the Head of the Futures Programme at the South African Institute of International Affairs, where he is responsible for leading the Institute's futures-informed research on strategic foresight, policy, planning and decision-making support for leaders, decision-makers, policymakers and multilateral institutions. Deon is also a research associate at the Centre for Sustainability Transitions at the School of Public Leadership, Stellenbosch University.

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Some Fellowship events are online; to find out more and connect with Fellows in our global community, visit *thersa.org/events/fellowship*

Grow your idea through RSA Catalyst, which offers grants for Fellow-led and new or early-stage projects with a social goal.

To find out more, visit
thersa.org/fellowship/catalyst-awards

Images from the RSA

Events

Catch up online

Leading public thinkers, innovators and changemakers take to the RSA Great Room and digital stage to share and debate the ideas, events and movements that are shaping the future of our societies, our economies and our world.

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Building a politics of the common good

Shadow Levelling Up Secretary Lisa Nandy MP and political scientist Maurice Glasman explore how to build a new politics for the post-Covid, post-Brexit era – one based on human relationships, mutuality and pluralism. For people to live flourishing lives in flourishing places, they argue, we need to bring assets, power and dignity back to local communities.

Watch now: https://bit.ly/3Wo0ZtZ
#RSAhealth

How social connections impact economic mobility

Professor Raj Chetty of Harvard University shares the findings from a new large-scale study of social capital in the US, and considers how the data might be further developed to improve policymaking, and increase social and economic opportunity around the world, including in the UK.

Watch now: https://bit.ly/3WmMlhh
#RSAsocialcapital

The Bicentenary Medal address

2022 Bicentenary Medallist, biomimicry pioneer Janine Benyus, urges us to look to nature's genius – evolved and adapted through 3.8 billion years of R&D – for the solutions that will help guide us to more resilient, rebalanced and regenerative futures for people, place and planet.

Watch now: https://bit.ly/3CZhlNy
#RSAdesign

Journeys through food, faith and culture

Author, journalist and broadcaster Jimi Famurewa offers a vivid portrait of the culture, traditions, food and politics of Black African London and explores what is revealed about the nature of modern Britain and modern diaspora life.

Watch now: https://bit.ly/3GS9fgi
#RSAculture

PREDICTION FICTION

A futurist-novelist explains how strategic forecasting helps build better tomorrows by facing the truths of today

by Madeline Ashby

"Who could have possibly predicted this?" has become the increasingly sarcastic refrain to seemingly every news item of this century. The mounting consequences of Brexit for the UK, the pandemic, global warming, species extinction, unchecked authoritarianism and starved social services are just a few of the headlines to have received this inevitable response. The implication, of course, is that anyone with two neurones to rub together could have foreseen what might happen if circumstances continued as they were. Collapsing supply chains, falling birth rates and rising wait times, the skyrocketing price of, say, rocket: all of these were predictable consequences of ongoing events.

So why didn't anyone say anything? Why didn't we, having read all the pertinent signs, exit the roundabout before becoming trapped? The truth is, someone did say something. Many someones said something.

Madeline Ashby is an author and futurist specialising in scenario development and science fiction prototypes. She is a member of the AI Policy Futures Group at the Arizona State University Center for Science and the Imagination and the XPRIZE Sci-Fi Advisory Council

Warning signs

Take Brexit as one example. In 2016, US Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen said that the UK's departure from the EU would have "significant economic repercussions" and likely trigger a rise in interest rates. That same year, then-UK Chancellor George Osborne warned, "There would have to be a hardening of the border imposed by the British government or indeed by the Irish government." Former British prime ministers Sir John Major and Tony Blair agreed, warning about the potential for destabilisation of the Good Friday Agreement and the Common Travel Area. In 2018, the Bank of England cautioned that, with a no-deal Brexit, the UK economy could shrink up to 8% in a single year, with a 25% drop in value for sterling. These are just some of the warnings about one issue. The same is true of all the other crises. People spoke up.

These warnings did not come from fringe figures, but from establishment figures with access to mainstream media platforms. They hailed from places we in the business call WEIRD: Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Developed. That is likely the closest that any of them have ever come to weirdness. And perhaps that is the root of the problem. Maybe they – the adults in the room – lacked the core capacity to imagine just how weird things might get. When Donald Trump was elected US president, the Canadian science fiction author William Gibson realised he had to rewrite his novel, *Agency*, in part because he had previously considered Trump's victory impossible: "I was losing a sense of how weird the real world was."

Myths, fables and fairy tales are full of warnings: witches on heaths, conjured spirits in caves, Cassandras and Sybils, all of them with access to the ear of one king or another. All of them warned against touching the hot stove of history. And all of them were dismissed as hysterical scolds or fearmongers.

Brain power

To understand why we minimise these warnings, it is important to understand the brain. Our brain has two risk-assessment mechanisms: the amygdala and the neocortex. The former evolved before the latter. The amygdala reacts to jump scares in horror films, while the neocortex reminds us that the person holding our hand during the film is statistically more likely to harm us than a stranger outside the cinema. These two systems often contradict each other and lead us to make decisions against our best interest. For example, the threat posed by social exclusion is more immediately alarming to our nervous system than the eventual threat of illness, which is why we pick up the drink or take off our masks.

Business and government are subject to the same conflicting impulses. The architecture of our brain can become the architecture of our policy. The threat of a mugging can feel more 'real' than the threat of wage theft, by far the more common crime. Still, most police budgets address the former more than the latter. And, in 1975, researchers Christine and J. Richard Eiser found that, when evaluating the likelihood of possible outcomes, people tend to opt for the outcome they personally prefer. Or, as Caroline Beaton put it in an article in *The Atlantic* of the same name: humans are bad at predicting futures that do not benefit them.

Consider Southwest Airlines: it posted consecutive profits between 1973 and 2019, in part because it saved money by not investing in higher technology. Cut to the holiday storm of December 2022, when Southwest cancelled almost 17,000 flights and lost between $725m and $825m (£598m and £680m) in a matter of days, primarily due to its outdated scheduling software. It is not that the airline did not know winter was coming; for years it had failed to listen to union leaders' warnings about exactly this possibility.

It is tempting to chalk up the aforementioned responses to social pressures like 'toxic positivity', or the avoidant habit of denying or minimising negative emotions, circumstances, events or possibilities. In London, this is the proverbial 'stiff upper lip'. In Los Angeles, it's #goodvibesonly. The pressure to maintain a positive outlook in the face of negative developments can cause people to blame themselves when they feel sad, frustrated or fearful, even when those feelings are warranted by their circumstances or recent events. (For example, the deaths of almost 7 million people from a preventable disease, or the fact that humans have killed 60% of the total wildlife population since 1970.) This is reframing gone amok, and over time it can lead to self-deception, dissociation and inauthentic communication.

This contributes to what my colleague Scott Smith calls "flat-pack futures", or what the Canadian scholar Sun-ha Hong calls "technofutures", which "preach revolutionary change while practicing a politics of inertia". These visions of possible future realities possess a mass-market sameness. They look like what happens when you tell an AI image generator to draw the future: just a slurry of genuine human creativity machined into a fine paste. Drone delivery, driverless cars, blockchain this, alt-currency that, smart mirrors, smart everything, and not a speck of dirt or illness or poverty or protest anywhere. Bloodless, bland, boring, banal. It is like ordering your future from the kids' menu.

When we cannot acknowledge how bad things are, we cannot imagine how to improve them. As with so many challenges, the first step is admitting there is a problem. But if you are isolated, ignored, or ridiculed at work or at home for acknowledging that problem, the problem becomes impossible to deal with. How we treat existential threats to the planet today is how doctors treated women's cancers until the latter half of the 20th century: by refusing to tell the patient she was dying.

But the issue is not just toxic positivity. Remember those myths about the warnings that go unheeded? The moral of those stories is not that some people are doomed never to be listened to. The moral of those stories is that people in power do not want to hear how they might lose it. It is not that the predictions were wrong, but that they were simply not what people wanted to hear. To work in futures, you have to tell people things they don't want to hear. And this is when it is useful to tell a story.

The stories we tell

Humans do what time does not: we die. So, we live our lives as stories with a beginning, a middle, an end. We speak of life in chapters. We tell stories to sort the chaos of experience into some semblance of order. The instinct to know what happens next is endemic; we are messy mammals who love drama. The novelist understands this instinct and has fun with it. The futurist understands this instinct and tries to cultivate it into a lifelong awareness.

I play both roles. I am a novelist and a consulting futurist or, more accurately, a strategic foresight consultant. Simply put, the latter involves evaluating today's practices against tomorrow's possible realities. I attended school for it; I have a master's in design in strategic foresight and innovation. Like my colleagues, I can research signals, trends and drivers and collate them into a report; facilitate a workshop to reveal

"To work in futures, you have to tell people things they don't want to hear. And this is when it is useful to tell a story."

insights; maintain awareness of instrumental changes in science, technology, culture, climate and policy; and develop scenarios which might assist in strategic planning and organisational change.

But, because I'm also a novelist, usually people come to me when they want a story told about a very particular future. "I need a near-term nuclear exchange future for the Eastern seaboard." "I need a story about an infrastructure attack on a smart city." "I need a story about the end of antibiotics." And so on.

My colleague Brian David Johnson calls these stories "science fiction prototypes". My colleagues August Cole and Peter W. Singer call the practice "useful fiction" or "fic-int". Sometimes the goal is to show how humans might behave in a situation that has yet to occur. Sometimes it is to show how humans might use emerging technologies. The process is a lot like bespoke tailoring. First, you take the client's measure: you ask about form, function and venue. You make a mock-up of a future and drape the story over it, then cut and cut again, and add finishing flourishes. At the end you hold up a mirror and say: *this is what it looks like*.

One value of this approach is that it has nothing to do with any single person or policy being right or wrong. It simply presents an immersive experience of potential alternatives or outcomes, informed by deep research, and then offers those experiences as topics for discussion. This experience can take the format of a short story, a comic book, a film, a museum exhibit, or even a piece of design fiction, a thing from the future that you can hold in your hands. But its goal is to provide a lived-in sense of a possible future so that its implications become as real to the amygdala as a jump scare.

Another advantage is that this approach can offer an aspirational vision. Science fiction is often credited with influencing technology development: the *Star Trek* tricorder becomes the iPhone; *Blade Runner*'s

"One cannot solve a problem without admitting it exists, and people cannot agree on a preferred future if they disagree about the past"

Voight-Kampff device becomes a biometric scanner at your airport. But these are narrow one-to-one comparisons. An aspirational future is a place where you might actually want to live. After all, the crew of the *Enterprise* had tricorders and transporters not because they purchased them, but because earth's governments united to renounce war, money and slavery, making the planet a legitimate entrant to a new system of exchange.

Storytelling is just one part of the foresight process, which, unlike many other forms of consulting, is not about assessing performance or finding efficiencies. Foresight is about looking ahead and deciding where to go next. My job is not to predict the future. My job is to help people have a fearless conversation about multiple futures.

Foresight creation

Strategic foresight evolved out of what we would now call strategic planning. In 1921, the Soviets founded the State Planning Committee. In 1932, H.G. Wells called for 'Departments and Professors of Foresight'. In 1933, the US Research Committee on Social Trends published its first report, influencing the formation of Social Security. The Second World War only highlighted the need for continuous strategising. Fast-forward to the 1970s and we see Pierre Wack using scenario forecasting at Royal Dutch Shell (helping the company to avoid the worst of the oil shock), and the first graduate programme in Public Policy and Alternative Futures, at the University of Hawaii. The UK's Government Office for Science has run foresight studies since 1993.

But the idea of a 'strategist' is ancient. As early as 600BC, the Greeks named one *strategos* (literally, 'a leader of that which is spread out') to a military command position for each tribe. The *strategoi* made decisions about where to move armed forces; 10 *strategoi* decided the victory at the Battle of Marathon in 490. From its military roots, the role of *strategos* became political and rhetorical over time. Pericles, the *strategos* who sculpted the Delian League into the Athenian Empire, ushered in public funding for the arts and initiated construction of the Acropolis.

In 1999, Richard Slaughter defined foresight: "Strategic foresight is the ability to create and sustain a variety of high-quality forward views and to apply these emerging insights in organisationally useful ways; for example, to detect adverse conditions, guide policy, shape strategy; to explore new markets, products and services." In our book *How to Future: Leading and Sense-making in an Age of Hyperchange*, Scott Smith lays out the foresight process in this way: scoping; sensing and scanning; sense-making and mapping; scenario development; storytelling and prototyping; ongoing assessment. In *4 Steps to the Future: A Quick and Clean Guide to Creating Foresight*, Richard A.K. Lum puts forward a simpler but broader process: past; present; futures; aspiration.

I mention both approaches because they offer an insight into where any foresight process gets tricky. One cannot solve a problem without admitting it exists, and people cannot agree on a preferred future if they disagree about the past. There is a reason that 'truth' has to come before 'reconciliation', something foresight professional Adam Kahane talks about at length in his books describing his work developing post-apartheid scenarios in South Africa.

Shared dystopias, bespoke utopias

This brings us back to fiction and questions that I am asked frequently: Where are all the utopias? Isn't science fiction supposed to be optimistic? Why can't kids today imagine better futures? The answer is: they can. But their ideal future is different from yours.

This is the dirty secret of why dystopias are more popular than utopias: they are easier to write because all the homework has already been done. Open up a history book, and you'll find plenty of examples to build a world on. All dystopias look the same: poverty; deprivation; the loss of rights; the rise of fear; a dead environment; mass surveillance. (For Orwell this was 1984. For you, it was Tuesday.) The bad guys might wear silver jumpsuits or black armour; the dictator might be called a hegemon or some other big word for a small man. The features of the dystopia might be different: some might violently enforce gender norms, while others might violently enforce gender norms… in space. Pick your poison, but it all boils down to this: same jackboot, different day.

Conversely, utopias are inherently bespoke. They embody ideals shaped by culture, time and experience, all of which can differ across nations, genders, incomes and more. Our utopias are different. You might think the opposite. You might think we all want the same things but have wildly different visions of how to achieve our aims. I regret to inform that this is not the case.

Not everyone wants peace. Not everyone wants equality. Not everyone wants rights or freedoms or accountability, or access to healthcare and education and infrastructure. Or, they might, but they might not want to share. Some people firmly believe that the world would be a better place if I couldn't vote or attend school or choose what to do with my uterus. Me, housebound and silent and dying of ectopic pregnancy: that's their shining city on a hill.

Everybody wants to rule their own world, and there are technologies available to make it happen such as virtual reality platforms, individual screens in every home, Uber for everything. They provide protection from surprise, which is to say, protection from difference. Decades of algorithms offering us nothing "more than more like". This, alongside the evaporation of our public spaces, has diminished our capacity to make space for community. This place would be great if it weren't for all the (other) customers.

But it is place, and placemaking, that's important. Imagining better futures requires making and holding dedicated physical, mental and emotional spaces for that imagining. Any effective foresight process requires time, space, energy and resources to pause for horizon-scanning and strategic evaluation of current behaviours. Futurists may feel as though we live a few years ahead of everyone else, but we achieve that velocity by slowing down to consider issues that others have ignored. This requires enough quiet to hear the inner voice chime in when someone asks, "What's the worst that could happen?" It requires the courage to answer the terrifying question of what it is we truly need.

Utopias are not places where nothing bad happens, but places where damage has been repaired. Creating an aspirational future is a profoundly vulnerable act. When describing a utopia, one is really pointing out wounds, and imagining what they might look like when healed.

But first, you have to show them where it hurts. ■

Cover and artworks by **Kyle Bean** for the RSA. Kyle is a London-based artist and director specialising in handcrafted design and imagery. To learn more, visit *kylebean.co.uk*

SISTER CITIES

A transatlantic relationship rooted in action and impact

by Grant Ervin, Lolita Jackson and Jamie Cooke

Since 2017, the RSA has been working in two cities – Pittsburgh and Glasgow – to develop a vision for the role that post-industrial cities could play in creating the economies and societies of the 21st century. From positions of industrial strength, both cities have experienced the harsh impact of decline as jobs dried up, traditional industries moved or lost relevance, and issues of population loss, social deprivation and health inequalities became synonymous with their public and political profiles.

Many cities have struggled to reinvent themselves in light of these types of challenges, but the renaissance in both has been a combination of recognising and cherishing the heritage they possess and opening up to new industries and economic opportunities. Glasgow is now a leading centre for satellite design and manufacture, helping to drive Scotland's growing space sector, while Pittsburgh is now routinely lauded as one of the most liveable cities in the US, with a blossoming tech sector fuelled by world-leading research in areas such as artificial intelligence attracting new residents from across the world.

In 2018, leadership from the RSA in the UK and US joined city leaders in Pittsburgh for the city's first Future of Work summit. This led to a Sister City Agreement between the two cities in 2020. This agreement is not a traditional twinning relationship, but is predicated on the desire, as expressed by former Mayor Bill Peduto of Pittsburgh and Councillor Susan Aitken, Leader of Glasgow City Government, for the connection to be rooted in action and impact.

Glasgow and Pittsburgh both continue to play a transformative part in the global clean energy transition. Glasgow was on the global stage in 2021 when the city hosted the world at COP26, where leaders crafted a formative discussion that led to recent advancements this year at COP27.

Meanwhile, alongside hosting the Global Clean Energy Action Forum, Pittsburgh and the Upper Appalachian and Ohio River Valley region were at the epicentre of the Biden administration's delivery of the Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, two of the most consequential investments in climate action in US history. The dialogue and policy advocacy calling for a "clean economy for all" and the need to support the transition of workers and communities whose livelihoods are rooted in the fossil economy, was driven by local leadership and is unmistakably at the core of the Biden administration's policy victories.

As cities like Glasgow and Pittsburgh pivot from education and advocacy related to the perils (and opportunities) of the climate crises, a new focus on program delivery and project execution must take shape... and fast.

The pandemic, local political transition, labour shortages and commodity price increases caused by exogenous shocks and shifting supply chains come at

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Artwork by Wardour/istock

a perilous time when considering the need to act on climate. Cities and private sector collaborators from the finance, energy and construction industries must come together to create the infrastructure delivery models needed to advance the intents of the clean energy economy advocacy and planning.

The next phase of the transition requires execution of four key actions. First, cities must commit and leverage their existing budget resources towards their identified climate actions. Creating a climate 'plan' is not enough. Utilization of existing financial resources is the first step in attracting the additional private and public capital necessary to meet ambitious emissions reduction targets or mitigate the negative implications of future climate-borne expenses.

Second, greater attention needs to be given to the creation of 'climate delivery teams' inside of city governments. Expecting the 'normal' functions of government operations alone to provide the actions required to meet the climate challenge is short-sighted and will result in operational paralysis.

Third, the public and private sectors must align to form a new area of public–private partnerships. Byzantine public procurement and contracting practices designed for a foregone era impede (and in many cases grind to a halt) the design and delivery of cost-effective infrastructure and construction solutions.

Finally, policy, procurement and permits are logical starting points for cities in their effort to address longstanding inequalities and the climate challenge concurrently. These 'three Ps' represent the ability of cities to utilise existing powers and contexts to drive new change. Such changes are core to the foundation of our need to build more just and inclusive outcomes, while concurrently reducing the consumption of carbon and protecting our people from climate-borne risks that threaten both health and economic sustainability.

"The public and private sectors must align to form a new area of public – private partnerships"

As explored by Tom Stratton in Issue 4 2022 of *RSA Journal*, the Society is currently driving the work of the UK Urban Future Commission, seeking to unlock the potential of cities across the UK. Our experiences with the cities of Glasgow and Pittsburgh show that this work has relevance across the globe, and that the Commission can and should be learning from experiences in other countries and the central place of our cities in creating a truly regenerative future ■

To learn more, visit thersa.org/projects/uk-urban-futures-commission

THE PERIODIC TABLE OF

This artwork by David Goldblatt, FRSA, depicts the 90 elements of one version of utopia in the same spatial arrangement and format of more conventional periodic tables. The piece serves as the core of a pop-up shop/art installation titled 'Utopian Chemistry', which will be housed in a variety of empty premises on high streets and shopping centres. Visitors can make their own element, from their own version of utopia, via a simple web and phone app that generates a digital version of the graphic, which can be used on social media or printed as a postcard.

To learn more, please visit www.feasibleutopias.org

1 Lo LOVE								
3 Ho HOPE	4 Ca CIVIC ACTIVISM							
11 Em EMPATHY	12 So SOLIDARITY							
19 Co COMPASSION	20 Ma MUTUAL AID	21 Dd DAY DREAMS	22 Sh SOCIAL HOUSING	23 Wk WALKING	24 Pm PLAYGROUNDS AND MEADOWS	25 Rd REDUCE	26 Gnd GREEN NEW DEAL	27 Ubi UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME
17 Ro ROOTS	38 Cz CITIZENS' JURIES	39 Pd PORTABLE PARADISE	40 Pp PEOPLE'S PALACES	41 Cy CYCLING	42 Uf URBAN FORESTS	43 Rp REPAIR	44 Ce CLEAN ENERGY	45 Uhc UNIVERSAL HEALTHCARE
55 La LAUGHTER	56 Dc DECENTRALISATION	71 Ic IMPROBABLE CONNECTIONS	72 Pt PUBLIC TRANSPORT	73 Sk SKATING	74 Cf CITY FARMS	75 Rc RECYCLE	76 Ra REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE	77 Ucc UNIVERSAL CHILDCARE
87 Ba BALANCE	88 Pv POLITICS AS A VOCATION	103 Ct CRITICAL THINKING	104 Ps PUBLIC SPACE	105 Pd PADDLING	106 Ra ROOFTOP ALLOTMENTS	107 Rx RELAX	108 Rw REWILDING	109 Usc UNIVERSAL SOCIAL CARE
1 FUNDAMENTALS	2 MICROPOLITICS	3 IMAGINARIUM	4 CIVIL CITIES	5 SELF-PROPULSION	6 URBAN BOTANICALS	7 CIRCULAR ECONOMY	8 ZERO CARBON	9 UNIVERSAL WELFARE

A FEASIBLE UTOPIA

								2 F FAMILY
			5 Ge GENDER EQUALITY	6 A ART	7 P PARTIES	8 Fnd FRIDAY NIGHT DINNER	9 L LESBIAN	10 Fr FRIENDSHIP
			13 RJ RACIAL JUSTICE	14 Py POETRY	15 Cc CEREMONIES AND CELEBRATIONS	16 Jzz JAZZ	17 Go GAY	18 Ro ROMANCE
28 Rw REDISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH	29 Wx WEALTH TAX	30 RJ RESTORATIVE JUSTICE	31 Nd NEURODIVERSITY	32 Rk RANDOM KINDNESS	33 Fe FESTIVALS	34 Ps THE POKER SCHOOL	35 B BISEXUAL	36 Sx SEXUAL ECSTASY
46 Fw FOUR-DAY WORKING WEEK	47 Cx CARBON TAX	48 Dl DRUG LEGISLATION	49 Dr DISABILITY RIGHTS	50 Sd SINGING AND DANCING	51 F FEASTING	52 Hs HOT SAUNAS	53 T TRANS	54 Ng NEIGHBOURHOOD
78 Uw USEFUL WORK	79 Lw LAND VALUE TAX	80 Ep EMPTY PRISONS	81 Rc RIGHTS OF THE CHILD	82 Pl PLAY	83 Gt GOOD TIMES	84 Sw SWIMMING WITH MILES	85 Q QUEER	86 Ct COMMUNITY
110 Ll LIFELONG LEARNING	111 Fx FINANCIAL TRANSACTION TAX	112 Pf THE PLEASE FORCE	113 Ifg INTERESTS OF FUTURE GENERATIONS	114 Th THERAPY	115 Gd GOOD DEATHS	116 Up UNUSUAL PEOPLE	117 + PLUS	118 Ce CHANCE ENCOUNTERS
10 LIFEWORK	11 TAX JUSTICE	12 UNHOSTILE EMPLOYMENT	13 THE RIGHT STUFF	14 FOOD FOR THE SOUL	15 COLLECTIVE ENERGY	16 MINE ALL MINE	17 NOWT SO QUEER AS	18 SOURCES OF INTIMACY

"You've got to release the energy and the untapped abilities that are in the cities"

Mayor of Bristol Marvin Rees talks to Rachel O'Brien about his work with the UK Urban Future Commission, a major new undertaking created by Core Cities and the RSA, and Bristol's ambitious plan for the future

Marvin Rees was elected Mayor of Bristol in May 2016 and re-elected in 2021. He is the Chair of Core Cities and a Co-Chair of the UK Urban Future Commission

Rachel O'Brien is Commissioning Editor of *RSA Journal*

Rachel O'Brien: Early in your career, you spent time in the US before returning to the UK. You have been a broadcaster, worked in NGOs and with the NHS. How did these experiences help to shape your political life?

Marvin Rees: My journey was not a career journey. It was chaos. I would describe it as a young Elisha looking for an Elijah. Elisha and Elijah are two Old Testament prophets, and Elijah mentored Elisha. I love my dad, but he wasn't around. I didn't know how to pull it together, so I was always looking. My first job out of university was with Tearfund, a development agency, and through that I got to know about *Sojourner*s, a faith-based community and magazine that came out of the civil rights movement. After a year there as an intern, I worked on Jubilee 2000, did a master's in economic development and went to work for Bill Clinton's adviser, Tony Campolo.

Back in the UK, I joined the BBC. Great journalism is an essential part of any functioning democracy. How you tell stories – and whose voice is heard – is of huge significance. But I also saw that only certain people are given a voice. I went to work on a race equality and mental health NHS programme. That was significant. Public health holds that health is not produced by the health system; over 40% of health outcomes are down to 'wider determinants' such as housing. I've certainly brought that into my mayoralty. You don't get outcomes because you come up with a policy in a sector on a theme. You need to rally a whole bunch of forces, over some of which you have no control. What the mayoral system offers is not command and control, or power over the city. What it offers is the power to convene and offer and ask.

O'Brien: Would you characterise Bristol as having a highly independent spirit and, if so, did this play into the decision to vote to scrap the role of mayor? (*In May 2022, voters in Bristol chose to end the mayoral role at the conclusion of Rees's term in 2024 and return to a committee system* – Ed.)

Rees: Bristol is a city of contradictions. It presents as this progressive, advanced, activist city. And in one sense it is, but it's also not at the same time. Personally, as me, as Marvin, I'm not part of that middle-class Bristol. I grew up as a mixed-race kid in Bristol. I lived on a housing estate with my single mum. Grew up around my one full sister and six half-brothers and sisters, one of whom grew up in the care system, another who left school with just one D grade GCSE because the school system totally failed him. I grew up on the 'wrong' side of those two Bristols. I fight my way through, get elected and, suddenly, I've got middle-class Bristol holding me up as the example of the political establishment.

My journey, breaking down these barriers, led me to this interesting place where some of the most marginalised people are more appreciative of me than those who profess to want to break down barriers to social mobility. That kind of green, independent, anti-establishment vote is one I have a difficult relationship with. I find that some of those more progressive groups are more comfortable with refugees than they are with third-generation Jamaicans. At Tearfund, I sometimes felt that the supporters of international development were more comfortable with helping Black people overseas than they were relating to Black people in their own country.

I've got two deputy mayors: Craig Cheney, one of 11 children who grew up in poverty, and Asher Craig, a Black Rasta woman. I think there is an issue, in a city of protest, when the three most senior politicians come from working-class Black and African backgrounds, and people want to rail and be angry at the political system, and they see me, Asher and Craig, and say, "Oh. What do we do around this?"

O'Brien: I cannot think of a more high-profile recent example of where city, place, identity and history have come to the fore than over the Edward Colston statue. How difficult was this and did it change how you think about Bristol?

Rees: It was challenging but I didn't find it difficult. I've grown up across these boundaries, with these contradictions, moving between identities and communities. Race isn't just about being nice to each other or polite language. It's about power. It's not about white guilt, either. I don't go home and give my mum or my nan a hard time for being white. But I am still going to talk about race in all its fullness. I'm going to be real about my white grandad's experience as the son of a poor Welsh miner who grew up in absolute poverty, and the lack of respect my mum experienced as a white woman. White privilege is real, but my mum did not lead a life of privilege. The accumulation of experiences I've had growing up across these boundaries prepared me for that moment in time.

The Colston statue was interesting, not least because it showed something about the way journalism works. There was no profile on the Colston Hall being renamed the Bristol Beacon. Why not? Because it wasn't dramatic. There was a conversation and orderly process that went on for years. For all those people that got excited about the Colston statue in the name of anti-racism, are you more interested in the drama of the event, or the actual substance of what may or may not happen? Do I want a statue of a slave trader up in the middle of the city? No. But I am the mayor. Can I sanction it being pulled down by a bunch of citizens with ropes? No. I've got to have an orderly process.

Some on the progressive side wonder why I didn't have the statue taken down earlier. I come in as the first Black mayor of a major city in Europe. We've just had a Brexit vote. So, the first thing I should do is come in and take down a statue that a number of white Bristolians see as synonymous with their identity? What would I end up doing for the next four years, and what would that mean for the prospects of a future Black person getting elected? I don't talk about housing then, I don't talk about mental health, or about transport. We just talk about me and symbolic statues.

When the statue got pulled down, there was no memo that arrived on my desk the next day saying mental health, asset ownership or education outcomes had changed. I would ask my critics, if you had finite resources, and you could do five things to tackle racism, what would you do first? Housing, probably, and then what? Mental health? Criminal justice? Education? That's not to say the statue isn't important, it is. But symbolic acts without substantial policy or system change can become what stalls progress. They're often more about the feelings of members of privileged groups than about the status of members of the oppressed groups.

O'Brien: Before Covid-19 arrived, you knew how unequal Bristol was, but how did it enhance that awareness among the city and services?

Rees: The popular piece of public analysis, or conclusion, is that the inequalities of our societies were exposed by Covid-19. But they were always there to be seen if people chose to see them. From the very beginning we saw that it was those people with underlying health conditions, who tend to be poorer, it was those people with jobs where they had to continue to go into work – the cleaners, people in factories – that were going to be disproportionately exposed. Before lockdown, we looked at reorienting programmes we had already put in place – like one for tackling child hunger in Bristol – towards whole families. We were able to be quite proactive because we'd always had that focus on poverty, equality and inclusion. We are ferociously ambitious, but we just want to make sure that it's inclusive and compassionate ambition.

O'Brien: Which takes me to the Levelling Up agenda. Have we got the right strategy to not just deal with what is coming but to really understand what has been?

Rees: Putting a new title on an old approach doesn't help. The phrase 'levelling up' was used and the fear was that it would just be another government announcing big pots of money and then telling local governments to fight for it, with some winners and some losers, according to how good their bid writers were. But we can all get with the sentiment. We should be ambitious and make that ambition inclusive. But I don't think government know how to do it; you can't level up from Westminster, and you can't level up by announcing funding pots.

"Symbolic acts without substantial policy or system change can become what stalls progress. They're often more about the feelings of members of privileged groups than about the status of members of the oppressed groups"

I've been involved in Gordon Brown's Commission on the UK's Future. It was essential work, but what struck a little bit of fear into me was the government's response: they said, "You're dealing with stuff that no one's interested in." But it's not just having the aim that's important; you've got to work out how you're going to get it done. It's the same with the UK. You can't deliver this just by playing around in Westminster with a few PPE graduates. You've got to release the energy and the untapped abilities that are in the cities, not just as individual units but as a collection of cities and their global connectivity.

O'Brien: Do you think we're at a tipping point, where there is that chance to release that energy?

Rees: No, I don't. For example, I've just been to COP27. The government, businesses and local government were all there. If the government was ▸

"What we should be doing is saying to the world and to the markets, 'I'm not just going to talk to you about balancing the books right now, but about the kind of country we are going to be in 2027'"

serious about this new model of governance, it would have organised a meeting before we got there, to come up with a coordinated, coherent approach and understand what investment is needed to mobilise the billions upon billions of pounds for decarbonisation of the UK's economy. It didn't do that, and I find that shocking. So maybe the words are being used but the government doesn't understand the ambitious, inclusive, cooperative leadership that we need.

O'Brien: How do we ensure that ambition and inclusivity is also regenerative?

Rees: We need to reframe the way we think about the economy. It seems to me that we have an approach to making our finances work that's akin to burning your coat to keep warm. We take short-term measures that may please the markets or give us a bit of momentary respite, but, when it's all done, we're in a desperate situation. We've done that by hollowing out the economy and local government over the last 12 years.

What we should be doing is saying to the world and to the markets, "I'm not just going to talk to you about balancing the books right now, but about the kind of country we are going to be in 2027. By 2027, we will be one of the most resilient countries in the world, both in terms of our physical population in mental health, physical health, the capacity of our children and young people to learn, the physical infrastructure we have in place, flood defences. We'll have a housing stock that people can afford to live in, we'll have social stability." Then, if we all agree that that's what we should be doing as a country, developing a learning-ready, work-ready, stable society that is environmentally, socially and politically resilient, then we need to communicate how we're going to do it. We're going to reclassify 'public spending' as 'public investment'. We're investing in mental health, in education and in creating a more resilient, equitable society.

O'Brien: Are you optimistic about that change and the potential of the Urban Future Commission, working with Core Cities UK, to play a role in this respect?

Rees: I'm not an optimist but I am a person of hope – Desmond Tutu made the distinction between the two. We're entering a period where we have an incredible opportunity to learn. It's not the way we'd have wanted to do it, but the pandemic tested every system in our society. The education system was tested for its resilience. Courts, parole, prison, food and transport systems were all tested. If we chose to, we could have watched that process, found out where the weaknesses were and then addressed them so we could be more resilient. I've seen no evidence of that happening; there is no coherent conversation between government and local authorities to identify those lessons.

When it comes to the Urban Future Commission, there's a phenomenal opportunity, not just to set out a vision, but to develop a plan for UK cities. In doing so, there are three key questions we need to address.

First, what are cities? What's the nature of the relationship between a city and the UK's economy, its overall performance? What is a city without its hinterland? We're interdependent. Bristol has a population of 472,000, but it's a million during the day. We have to understand how the health of Bristol is connected to areas around it and vice versa. That should help us get beyond this false towns-versus-cities debate.

Second, what do we need cities to be? We need cities to be affordable, a massive challenge with gentrification. We need them to be maximising efficiency so that they're not producing a massive disproportionate burden on the planet. We need them to be economically strong and globally connected for our trade, soft power and relationships.

The third question spills out from those two. How do we help cities become what they need to be? For me, that means a plan that is attached to real dates and real finance because this stuff doesn't happen without being invested in. We need houses built, we need mass transit put in place, we need decarbonised heat systems, circular economies, sustainable food supplies and an educated population. If we do it right, we could be in the very earliest stages of writing an evidence-based plan for UK cities that takes us up to 2050.

And that will involve devolution. We need to frame this as an offer and an ask. We will collect evidence that will clearly demonstrate the scale of the offer that the UK cities can make to the UK and to the world, and what's needed to release that offer, which will be dates, finance, and a rewiring of national leadership. Not to say that the national government disappears, but sometimes its role is to be a top-class follower, to say, "Right, Bristol, I see you're developing this big energy deal, City League. We want to come in and support you. How can we follow you in this and help you to make it possible?"

There will be times when national government still needs to lead. But we need to mature so that we see that the weighting of leadership around specific issues in different contexts at different times will shift between cities and national governments. This would be a much more dynamic model. That will take a lot of humility and maturity between the various parties; we are not there yet. We still have this default that there is a hierarchy of political leadership and governance, and anything outside of Westminster is somehow second tier.

O'Brien: The pandemic reinforced the potential of local action and engagement, highlighting local sources of trust. Both within the Commission but also more broadly, what is the role of the public?

Rees: In terms of engagement, we all have a responsibility to get involved. You've got a responsibility, as the public, to source your information. But politics and journalism also bear a piece of blame in disengaging the public. Politicians serve up conflict, and there are councils like that, too. Why? Because the journalists cover the scraps and create binary options because that's easy to sell and makes for a good headline. So, you've got three groups taking us down a rabbit hole; no one's on thick ice.

But 'governance' is not just about elected politicians. Making this real will be down to politicians and policymakers, but it'll also be down to the private sector, private financing and philanthropy, who may, in some instances, want to come in and de-risk new kinds of markets; cladding of homes, off-site manufactured housing that can be put up quickly. We need to get pipelines ready that those markets need. We will also need a thriving social sector and to factor in the voluntary community sector, which can help build stable, resilient communities. This is about a collective act across all sectors ■

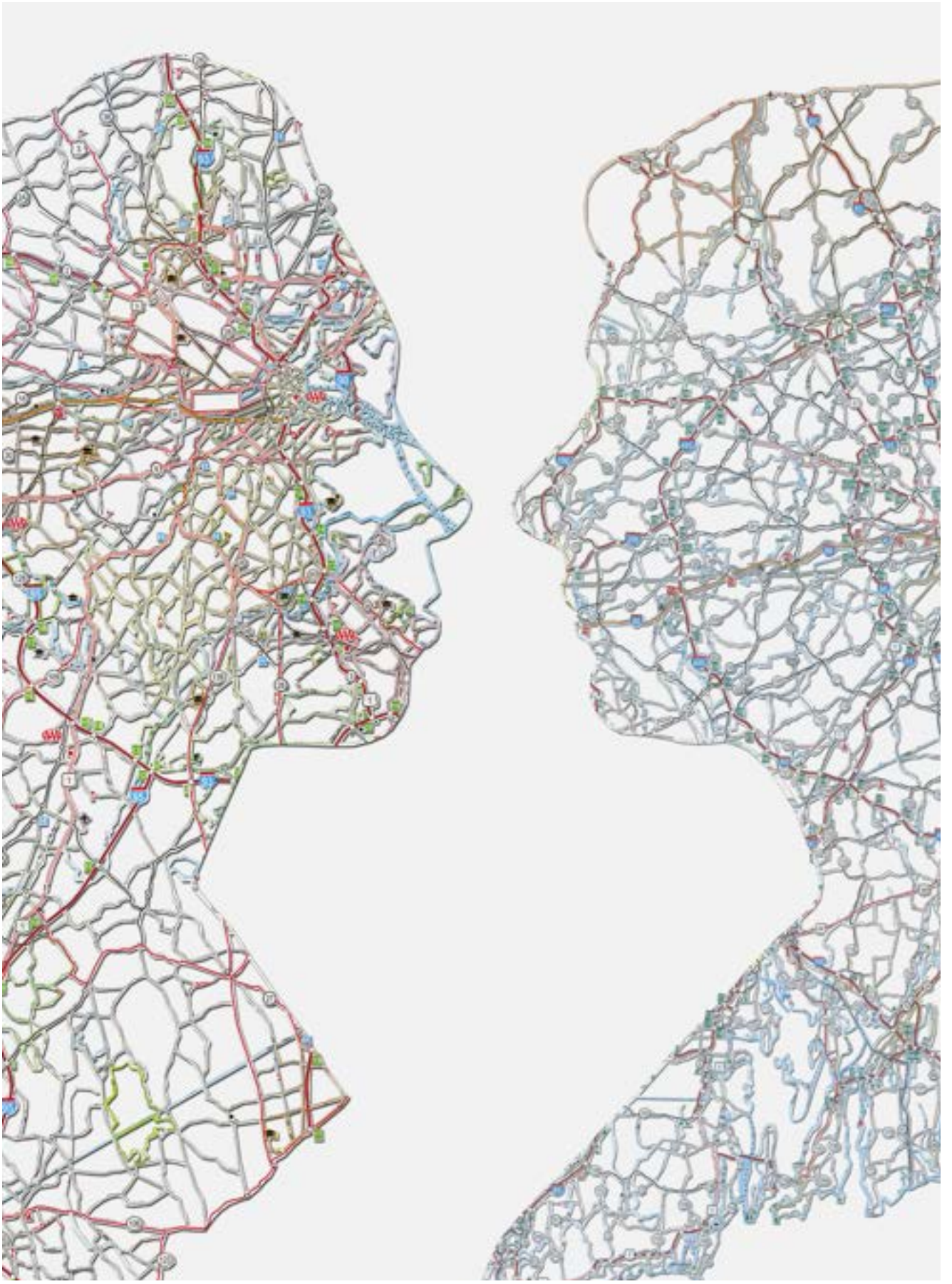
Community Climate Circles

Guy Dauncey, FRSA, received a £2,000 Catalyst Seed Grant in 2021 to develop Community Climate Circles in Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada, with the goal to train volunteer 'Connectors' to initiate discussions with neighbours on the climate crisis, and actions to address it. Guy, who is founder of the BC Sustainable Energy Association and the West Coast Climate Action Network, developed the project to create ways to connect directly with 'regular citizens' that would spur grassroots action.

The project initially trained 20 Connectors to have one-to-one climate conversations with their friends, neighbours and workmates in a non-judgemental manner focused on listening and sharing stories. "Neighbours did not want to meet each other," said Guy, "partly because of Covid and partly because they were cautious about having a conversation that could be difficult." In response, the project was redesigned in 2022 as the Nanaimo Climate Pledge, which included the creation of a large colour brochure detailing 12 climate actions people could take. Guy and his team chose five ways to distribute the brochures (including via the Connectors) and will gather the results in spring 2023 "to see which method was the most effective, prior to seeking funding to roll the project out to the whole community of 100,000 people".

■ *To learn more, visit www.nanaimoclimatepledge.ca*

Images courtesy of Marvin Rees



NEW DIRECTIONS IN URBAN DESIGN

Intentional guidelines can support a pluralistic, flexible and inclusive approach to building

by Rami el Samahy

As both a practising architect and an academic, one is used to (and indeed, enjoys) straddling what can be done and what ought to be done. These competing priorities can help shape a productive tension. That tension plays out most palpably in the urban realm, an area of interest for both the practice and our research. We gravitate towards urban design because of its liminal nature as the space between planning and architecture and, also, as "the space between buildings", as the Danish urban designer Jan Gehl famously described it. Here, issues of aesthetics, character, function, policy and politics are all at play.

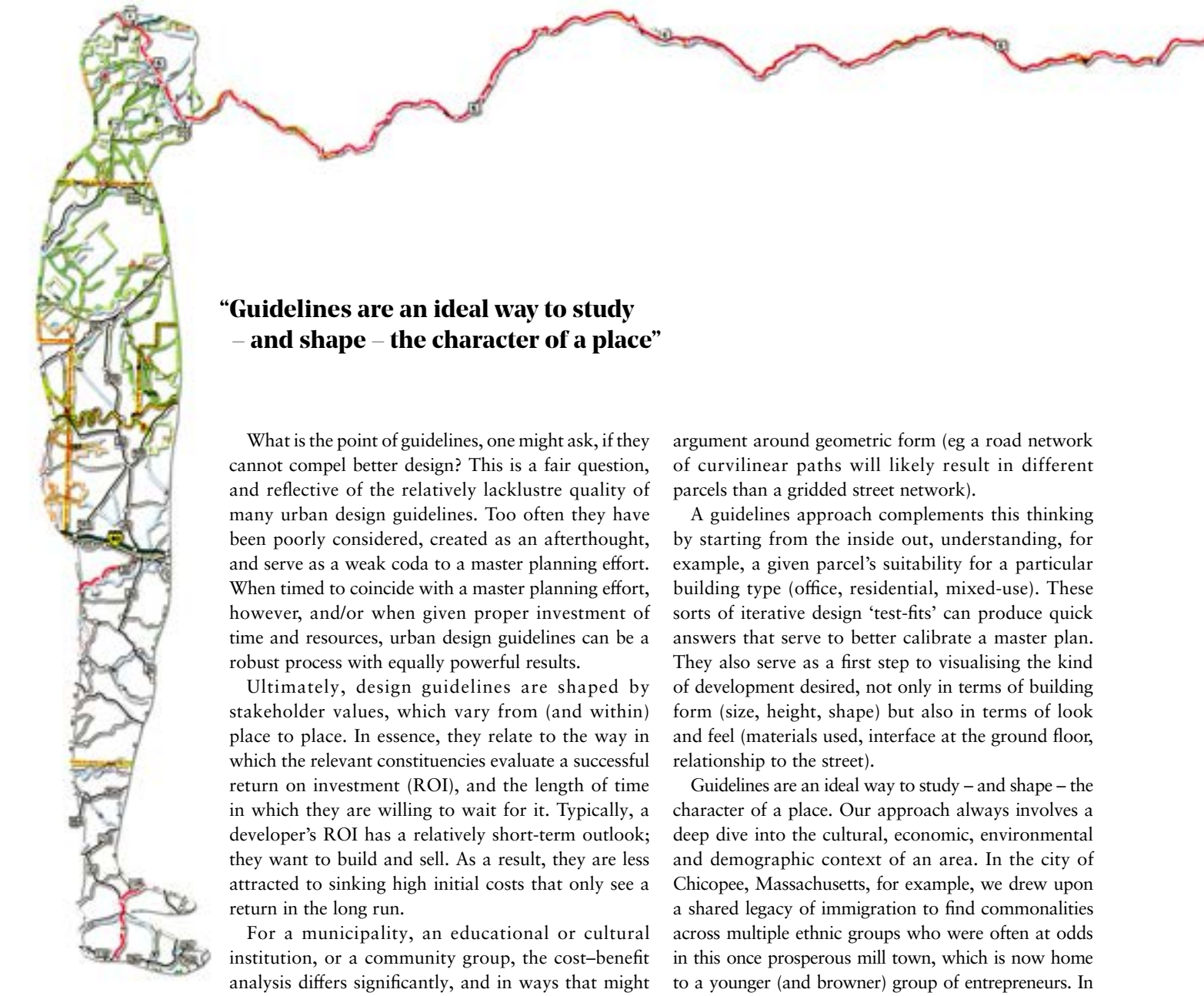
Over the past two decades, my academic research and my firm's projects have concentrated in two areas of the world: the rapidly growing new metropolises of the Persian Gulf and post-industrial towns of the American northeast. On the surface, the difference could not be more stark: fast growth versus slow decline; issues of water scarcity in hot desert climates versus threats of flooding in a humid continental climate; top–down development versus grass-roots capacity-building.

In other ways, however, they are surprisingly similar. In both cases, these conurbations came to fruition via a combination of geography and human determination. Built in large part with an influx of immigrant communities, the original raison d'être of both locales stems from the sudden growth of one or two industries (oil and/or natural gas in the Gulf cities; coal and navigable riverways in the northeast US). And while Gulf city populations are currently experiencing rapid growth, and the American post-industrial cities have experienced steep decline compared with their heyday, they can each be thought of as being at different points along a similar historical trajectory.

Through a combination of happenstance and proclivity, much of our professional work in these cities and towns involves the creation of urban design guidelines, an urban design tool even less well defined than urban design itself. Generally speaking, urban design guidelines are a set of statements and illustrations that combine to describe the desired qualities in the development of an urban environment. Put another way, guidelines sit between the master plan of the neighbourhood, district or city and the architecture of individual buildings or public places. They help imagine the future character of a specific area, be it district, neighbourhood or street.

Unlike zoning codes, which carry the weight of law, guidelines might be described as a strong suggestion, serving as guidance for future development. In this way, they reflect the values of the community, set expectations for future form and character of buildings, open spaces, and streetscapes, and serve to encourage better-quality design of those buildings, open spaces and streetscapes. Design guidelines cannot change land uses, dimensional requirements (eg building heights) or impose strict limitations on building form or style, unless the governing authority chooses to tie the guidelines directly to a sale or incorporate into law.

Rami el Samahy is an architect and urban planner, an adjunct lecturer at MIT and a founding principal of OverUnder, a Boston-based architecture and design firm



"Guidelines are an ideal way to study – and shape – the character of a place"

What is the point of guidelines, one might ask, if they cannot compel better design? This is a fair question, and reflective of the relatively lacklustre quality of many urban design guidelines. Too often they have been poorly considered, created as an afterthought, and serve as a weak coda to a master planning effort. When timed to coincide with a master planning effort, however, and/or when given proper investment of time and resources, urban design guidelines can be a robust process with equally powerful results.

Ultimately, design guidelines are shaped by stakeholder values, which vary from (and within) place to place. In essence, they relate to the way in which the relevant constituencies evaluate a successful return on investment (ROI), and the length of time in which they are willing to wait for it. Typically, a developer's ROI has a relatively short-term outlook; they want to build and sell. As a result, they are less attracted to sinking high initial costs that only see a return in the long run.

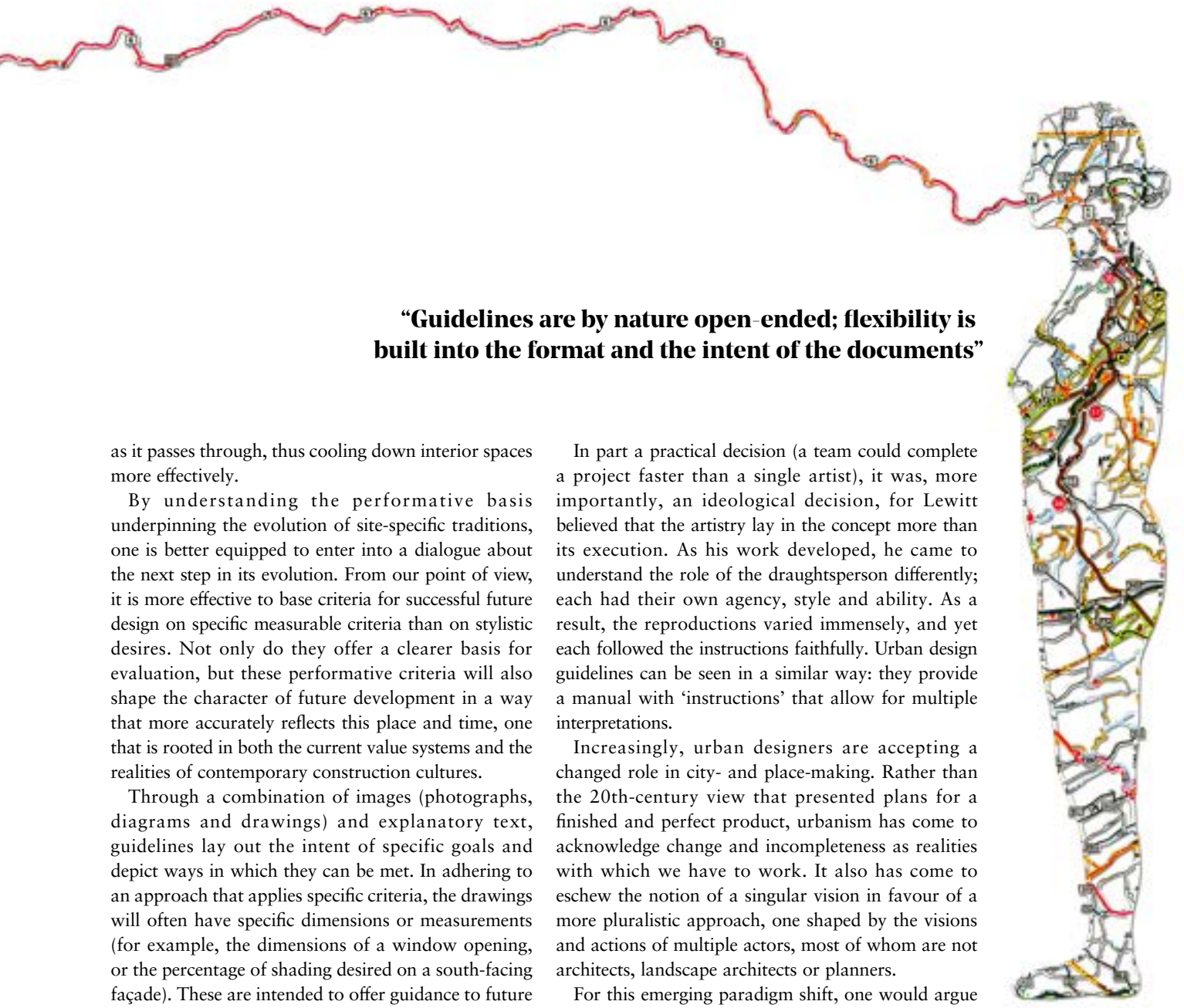
For a municipality, an educational or cultural institution, or a community group, the cost–benefit analysis differs significantly, and in ways that might justify higher initial costs to create a future that is economically, socially and environmentally more sustainable. Unsurprisingly, it is these groups that seek to create more effective guidelines, in part as a means to pressure individual developers to create better quality projects.

Guideline efforts that run parallel to master plans can be a productive way to 'audit' master plans. Master plans tend to work at the largest scale, from the outside in. The shaping of individual buildings and public places are typically determined via a combination of development factors (eg how many floors can be built on a given parcel) and an aesthetic argument around geometric form (eg a road network of curvilinear paths will likely result in different parcels than a gridded street network).

A guidelines approach complements this thinking by starting from the inside out, understanding, for example, a given parcel's suitability for a particular building type (office, residential, mixed-use). These sorts of iterative design 'test-fits' can produce quick answers that serve to better calibrate a master plan. They also serve as a first step to visualising the kind of development desired, not only in terms of building form (size, height, shape) but also in terms of look and feel (materials used, interface at the ground floor, relationship to the street).

Guidelines are an ideal way to study – and shape – the character of a place. Our approach always involves a deep dive into the cultural, economic, environmental and demographic context of an area. In the city of Chicopee, Massachusetts, for example, we drew upon a shared legacy of immigration to find commonalities across multiple ethnic groups who were often at odds in this once prosperous mill town, which is now home to a younger (and browner) group of entrepreneurs. In Cambridge, we have sought to counter concerns that new affordable housing guidelines might 'alter the character' of a neighbourhood through analysis that highlights the already eclectic nature of the city's locales.

Understanding this context also provides a deeper understanding of extant built form and a fuller explanation for the decisions that might initially appear stylistic. For example, a Middle Eastern building that pre-dates air-conditioning and is oriented to receive the prevailing breeze through an intricately patterned screen system was not installed because the denizens liked mashrabiyya screens, but because the many small holes accelerate the velocity of the wind



"Guidelines are by nature open-ended; flexibility is built into the format and the intent of the documents"

as it passes through, thus cooling down interior spaces more effectively.

By understanding the performative basis underpinning the evolution of site-specific traditions, one is better equipped to enter into a dialogue about the next step in its evolution. From our point of view, it is more effective to base criteria for successful future design on specific measurable criteria than on stylistic desires. Not only do they offer a clearer basis for evaluation, but these performative criteria will also shape the character of future development in a way that more accurately reflects this place and time, one that is rooted in both the current value systems and the realities of contemporary construction cultures.

Through a combination of images (photographs, diagrams and drawings) and explanatory text, guidelines lay out the intent of specific goals and depict ways in which they can be met. In adhering to an approach that applies specific criteria, the drawings will often have specific dimensions or measurements (for example, the dimensions of a window opening, or the percentage of shading desired on a south-facing façade). These are intended to offer guidance to future designers rather than to inhibit them, to serve as a springboard to further creativity rather than a ceiling.

From our point of view, the approach of using images and words to explain intent for future development is analogous to that which informed the conceptual artist Sol Lewitt's wall drawings. Beginning in the late 1960s, Lewitt began to create instructions for draughtspeople to enact his artworks rather than draw them himself. Each consisted of a diagram and series of written instructions. For example, wall drawing #49 reads: "A wall is divided vertically into fifteen equal parts, each with a different direction and color, and all combinations."

In part a practical decision (a team could complete a project faster than a single artist), it was, more importantly, an ideological decision, for Lewitt believed that the artistry lay in the concept more than its execution. As his work developed, he came to understand the role of the draughtsperson differently; each had their own agency, style and ability. As a result, the reproductions varied immensely, and yet each followed the instructions faithfully. Urban design guidelines can be seen in a similar way: they provide a manual with 'instructions' that allow for multiple interpretations.

Increasingly, urban designers are accepting a changed role in city- and place-making. Rather than the 20th-century view that presented plans for a finished and perfect product, urbanism has come to acknowledge change and incompleteness as realities with which we have to work. It also has come to eschew the notion of a singular vision in favour of a more pluralistic approach, one shaped by the visions and actions of multiple actors, most of whom are not architects, landscape architects or planners.

For this emerging paradigm shift, one would argue that guidelines are an ideal tool. From a procedural point of view, they offer opportunities for multiple voices to weigh in and inform the process: from establishing goals and priorities to responding to the draft words and drawings that serve to shape urban elements. In terms of a product, guidelines are by nature open-ended; flexibility is built into the format and the intent of the documents. At the same time, they provide a means by which community and stakeholder values (ever evolving) are reflected in the built environment. And, like a Sol Lewitt wall drawing, each set of guidelines allows for – indeed is designed for – a plurality of possible outcomes. ■

Artworks supplied by **Nikki Rosato.** *nikkirosato.com*

HOPE FOR THE AMAZON?

A new government in Brazil is working quickly to reverse environmental losses of the Bolsonaro years

by Mercedes Bustamante

October's re-election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as president of Brazil was received with great relief by environmentalists and scientists concerned with the increasing deforestation rates in the Amazon. The relief is worldwide: Amazon rainforests are global ecological assets, spanning 600 million acres across nine countries on the South American continent and absorbing 2 billion tons of CO_2 each year.

Lula defeated Jair Bolsonaro, whose rhetoric and policies weakened environmental agencies responsible for law enforcement, paralysed the demarcation of indigenous lands and tried to discredit scientists and their research, including deforestation data from the Institute of Space Research in Brazil. Bolsonaro's time in office (2019–22) not only saw the highest level of Amazon deforestation since 2009, but also hindered participation of civil society in relevant environmental councils, creating a context that increased the vulnerability of environmental activists, particularly those from indigenous communities.

By contrast, Lula's first post-election speech emphasised environmental and climate agendas, including an intention to reinstate Brazil as an essential player in international negotiations. His first international visit after the election was to COP27 in Egypt to reinforce his commitment to situating control of deforestation central to his agenda. The composition of Lula's government includes experienced politicians, such as Marina Silva at the Ministry of the Environment, who was responsible for deforestation control during Lula's first term in the presidency (Lula previously served two terms, from 2003 to 2011). For the first time, Brazil also has a Ministry for Indigenous Peoples, led by Sonia Guajajara, an indigenous woman. Resuming the demarcation of indigenous territories is essential to their protection, recognition and valuable contribution to forest conservation.

Moving forward

Further action will be necessary on three fronts. First, the institutional reconstruction of related policy. Deforestation control and combating illegal activities associated with environmental degradation are urgently needed and require the rebuilding of environmental agencies and law enforcement initiatives. The extent of organised crime in deforestation means it will be critical to coordinate all the sectors responsible for law enforcement on the ground along with intelligence agencies and financial institutions. In his first week, Lula's administration reinstated the National Program of Deforestation Control in the Amazon and the Amazon Fund, part of the UN-backed REDD+ framework for stopping the destruction of forest.

The second front involves working across politics and sectors. The new parliament's composition signals an intention to reach out to sectors less committed to environmental protection in recent years. This is critical and must include opening dialogue with the agribusiness caucus, seeking moderate voices that understand the negative impacts for the sector in international trade if deforestation continues. Collaboration with Amazonian state governors will also be critical; active during COP27, these stakeholders are responsible for a significant share of preserved forest.

Finally, there is a need to strengthen collaboration across national governments in the Amazon basin,

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Image: Getty images

backed by global support. International cooperation can reinforce coordination between Amazonian countries facing similar challenges in reconciling local development and nature conservation. An assessment of private and public global climate finance flows by the Climate Policy Initiative indicated that these almost doubled between 2011 and 2020; access to these can promote a sustainable economy for the Amazon.

A global asset

The Amazon basin's fate is central to the global crises of climate change and biodiversity decline; it is one of the most critical elements of the global climate system as a significant source of water and energy to the atmosphere. The undisturbed Amazonian rainforest acts as a net sink for carbon but is weakening, resulting in a spiral of degradation as well as increased risks of infectious and new zoonotic diseases. Extreme climactic events, land use, drought stress and tree mortality raise the central question of when and where forest clearing will lead to crossing tipping points.

Evidence shows that damage to the Amazon rainforests is happening at unprecedented rates. The urgent solutions needed must consider that 34 million people live in the region, a remarkably diverse population of indigenous peoples (encompassing over 350 ethnic groups and speaking about 300 languages), Afro-descendants and migrants from different regions and origins. We also need to be clear that deforestation does not reduce poverty. Data analysis across 794 municipalities of the Brazilian Amazon from 2002 to 2019 (undertaken by Darren Norris et al. and published in 2022) found that reducing forest cover did not promote socioeconomic progress.

"There is a need to strengthen collaboration across national governments in the Amazon basin, backed by global support"

Lula returns to a far more complex context than he faced in his previous two terms. However, there is also significant social capital accumulated in civil society organisations and institutions that have endured the Bolsonaro years, demonstrated by strong opposition to the disturbing events in Brazil in early January 2023, when pro-Bolsonaro rioters stormed government buildings in the capital, Brasilia. A new plan for the Amazon must incorporate the conservation of the ecosystem function and diversity and economic wellbeing based on non-predatory activities, equity, social justice and rights.

The first indications of cross-cutting and coordinated initiatives are a good signal in this direction. ■

BELONGING

What does it take to transform a neighbourhood into a community?

by Nicola Bacon

My work at Social Life – which specialises in exploring how individuals and communities are affected by changes in the built environment – is about the relationship between people and places. It takes me to local neighbourhoods and allows me to take part in conversations about how people feel about the places they live in and use. In 2019, with no knowledge of what was round the corner, I wrote in this journal: "When we feel that change is not working in our best interests, that it is restricting, rather than increasing, our options, then our sense of belonging in the future is threatened." The concerns then in my mind were Brexit, Remainers versus Leavers, change and inequalities within and between neighbourhoods, and the multitude of pressures on communities, from global market forces to public sector regeneration programmes.

At the time, we were hearing concerns about belonging, not only in the present but also in the future. Would neighbourhoods and high streets be 'for us' in 10 years' time? Since then, we have had a pandemic, the start of war in Ukraine, global economic pressures and soaring costs of living. Now, as we collectively experience extraordinary anxieties about strikes and political instability, high inflation and cost-of-living pressures, problems paying for heat, housing and food, this comment seems strangely prescient.

Our sense of belonging matters, whether to our local neighbourhood, our street, our workplace, our faith or our community (however we choose to define it). In the 1950s and 1960s, psychologist John Bowlby described the fundamental importance of attachment, highlighting how we are all social beings with a need to belong from our earliest days. His theories, substantiated by neuroscientists, demonstrate how belonging supports neurological development. Professor Louise Ryan of London Metropolitan University speaks about belonging as a dynamic process, changing over time and impacted by our complex and intersectional life experiences. Her work in Kilburn in London published in 2021 looks at the way that our attachments to place, our "embedding" and "disembedding", change through time and are affected by external change, relationship change and the material circumstances of our lives.

Pandemic impacts

So, what do we know about the impact of the unexpected events of the early 2020s on our sense of belonging? In the UK, national surveys run by government and research councils measure our sense of belonging to our local neighbourhood. Understanding Society, the UK's largest and longest-running longitudinal survey, shows that the number of us who agree or strongly agree that we belong to the neighbourhood we live in decreased somewhat more in 2021 than previous years. However, these differences are nowhere near as stark as the dramatic fall across all wellbeing indicators – from life satisfaction to anxiety – that the Office for National Statistics reported after March 2020.

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Artwork by **Peter Crowther** for the RSA. *pcrowther.com*

The Greater London Authority's 2021 Survey of Londoners shows that more people feel they belong to London than to their neighbourhood. It also showed how life circumstances and experiences of inequality and discrimination shape our sense of belonging: we are more likely to feel we belong to our local area if we are over 35, live in a less deprived area, and have housing security through homeownership or a council or housing association tenancy. We are less likely to feel we belong if we do not identify with a religion or think of ourselves as having a mixed ethnicity or affiliation with multiple ethnic groups.

The pandemic put massive pressures on our social relationships and our relationships with the places in which we live. For some people, it was a positive time with family and nearby friends, developing closer ties to community and neighbourhood in the narrower world of locked-down and restricted Britain. Others found themselves bereaved, under pressure at work, or in isolated, claustrophobic and even dangerous situations at home.

Just before, and during, the first lockdown, we spoke to people throughout the UK to understand how the built environment affected their quality of life. This research for the Quality of Life Foundation showed how the lived and built aspects of a person's environment are connected to each other through local identities and relationships, as well as through the way we participate in and engage in neighbourhood life. During lockdown, appreciation of their local areas increased for many, helping them feel a sense of belonging at a time when many experienced isolation and disruption. It was striking how quickly people developed new routines that cemented their attachments, such as taking daily walks. One person told us: "I feel a lot more connected to my local area, I feel I know it a lot better. The repetitive walks have made me see more of the inequality."

We also noticed how people's emotional reaction to the pandemic changed over time. During the time of restrictions, our work became very London-focused, but we managed to keep talking to people at the sharp end of the pandemic and of wider social and neighbourhood change. Working in Catford, Hayes, Homerton, Southwark, South Acton and Surbiton, we saw how initial anxieties were matched by creative responses from grassroots groups and local services, and how relationships and local identity became important assets.

Later in the pandemic, we observed the cumulative strain on social relationships and our collective and individual resilience. The social and economic impact of the pandemic magnified existing inequalities. More people spoke to us about their concerns for others who they saw as vulnerable. We also heard about growing intergenerational resentment as older people stayed in and young people partied in parks. We found that people who faced the most difficulties were not necessarily living on the lowest incomes but were often those who did not have relationships with neighbours and local services. Belonging, when discussed, was a positive factor that helped buttress people against external strain and internal anxiety, but it was an asset that was not distributed evenly.

Young people in Southwark described how their sense of belonging to their local areas was linked to having friends locally, knowing their way around the neighbourhood and having strong connections to local institutions. The pandemic restricted many young people to smaller geographies, with churches, community centres, cafes, shops and local clubs closing or restricting access. Young people found themselves with limited spaces where they could socialise or build their networks of support. As one young person put it: "Before the pandemic, I really liked where I lived; it's comfortable to me because it's very welcoming, with many cultures and really diverse. During the pandemic, it felt less open and there is not a lot of green spaces."

Some young people noted that feelings of belonging are not fixed. They described how the transformation of their neighbourhoods affected local relationships, attachments and the identity of local areas. One young person told us: "Lots of people had the same struggles as my parents; migrating to the country, lots of people had the same experiences. Now, we don't feel like this… I need to push myself to relate to the people who move to the area. Shops and buildings are changing. I think I might need to move."

A public health approach

Considering what we witnessed during the pandemic, what does this suggest about belonging in 2023, another time of high anxiety and economic and social

pressures? Belonging is fluid. It is specific to our everyday experience and life choices, but also driven by the pressures we find ourselves under. It is also strongly influenced by what services and institutions do, how we are treated when we are in need of care or support, and whether our surroundings, our workplaces, even the shops and cafes we use, positively reflect who we are. We know that the design of our built environment, how it is managed and used, can boost or undermine belonging. We also know that the way social infrastructure operates – from formal welfare institutions like libraries and GP surgeries, to informal supports through cafes, WhatsApp groups and football clubs – also has a significant role.

We need to take a three-pronged, public health approach to belonging in our neighbourhoods and our local social spaces.

First, we must design for belonging, making sure that places feel welcoming and inclusive. 'Poor doors', playgrounds segregated by tenure, design that speaks to one group and not to others, do not make people feel at home. Benches and places to socialise that are placed so everyone can use them, design that does not differentiate on tenure and income, features that encourage 'light touch' neighbourly relationships and that link new development to the surroundings and to the local identity all can promote a sense of belonging.

Second, we need to create the supports and services that help people belong. This means focusing on building relationships and maximising social contact within and between groups. The We Walworth project, for example, is building social capital by developing a programme of local conversations and events that bring people together across the neighbourhood to find new ways of tackling inequality through food. Relationship-based practice in community-building and within services is becoming more widespread; however, it is something that is easy to talk about but more difficult to do. It can be challenging for established ways of working and hierarchies.

Finally, and critically, we need to value what is supporting belonging and be wary of change that undermines this valuable social asset. This means a preference for refurbishment rather than demolition – of estates, neighbourhoods or town centres – improving and evolving what is on offer to leverage the strengths of existing local identity. Contrast what has happened to two 1970s shopping centres: in Seoul, South Korea, the massive Sewoon Sangga shopping centre was refurnished to provide a maker space, new shops, a roof terrace and a community garden, but maintaining its original structure and its tenants, mainly lighting and electronics traders. In London's Elephant and Castle, a purpose-built concrete shopping centre of a similar era was demolished, displacing the Latin American and West African traders who had successfully made it a centre of trade and business and of social and community support.

Promoting belonging in difficult times helps give people a sense of control when so many aspects of life seem precarious. Our sense of belonging to our local areas is a social asset built up over time, but we cannot take it for granted. Feeling that you belong cannot tackle food poverty or poor housing but can, as a central element of social capital, help people be more resilient and better equipped to manage difficult times. A firmer focus on designing for belonging while protecting existing social assets entails thinking differently about what the public sector and community agencies do and what matters most – this can be difficult during times of institutional stress when imaginations often narrow, but it is not necessarily costly. Belonging has the potential to become a new compass for a public sector struggling to cope with pressures of need, increasing costs and shrinking budgets. ■

No Smoke Without Fire

In September 2022, the SAFE Foundation was awarded a £10,000 RSA Catalyst Scaling Grant for its 'No Smoke Without Fire' initiative. This multifaceted project teaches participants in communities in India, Uganda, Sierra Leone and Wales the basic woodworking and sewing skills necessary to make a textile slow cooker bag and a timber sun box oven as a means to generate income, reduce cooking costs and widen participants' knowledge around sustainable, low-energy cooking and environmental issues.

SAFE designs the training packs for its overseas partners to deliver workshops in-house, and networks with in-country experts to share knowledge. According to Angela Bettany, Operations Director of SAFE, while the primary aim of the project is to improve conditions in communities around the world where cooking over open fires is both a health and environmental hazard, running the project with communities in Swansea and Cardiff will teach young people about living more sustainably. Angela said: "With the decline in habitat and the pace of climate breakdown increasing, it is now imperative that our work equips our communities with the skills they need to combat climate change."

SAFE will work with each community to choose stuffing for the bags and box ovens that is natural, surplus and culturally meaningful in the local area. This aims to help participants feel connected with the finished product, increasing the chances of long-term changes to their cooking habits.

■ *To learn how you can help, visit www.thesafefoundation.co.uk*

COULD COHOUSING CATCH ON?

How a group of friends built a multi-generational community

by Salla Korpela

Ecological sustainability, energy scarcity, the rising cost of living – these are the critical global issues with which we struggle. On top of these sits the more private and silent crisis of loneliness. We may live close to each other and yet be out of touch. Living alone, or experiencing loneliness, can be strenuous, busy, expensive and sad.

Around 15 years ago, I found myself in this situation. I had divorced my husband and was alone with my three young children. A highly educated, successful woman in my 40s, I was not marginalised in any way, but found my life so busy that, apart from work contacts, I spent my weekdays practically without adult interaction. With children and household needs to attend to after work, there was simply no time even for a cup of tea with a friend. I had a group of close friends and, together, we had dreamed about living under the same roof as we grew older. At that point in my life this dream began to rekindle. Why wait until old age? If we lived in the same building, we could daily share life's joys, sorrows and responsibilities and still have time for the occasional cup of tea in the midst of our busy lives.

This vision spurred the process of designing and building a cohousing project and, after six and a half years of persistent effort, Malta House, a 10-storey, 61-unit communal apartment building with space for around 120 residents, was completed. 'Malta' comes from the Finnish word meaning 'have patience' – a useful reminder to repeat as we worked to make our dream a reality. Completed in 2013, Malta House – the brainchild of architect (and professor) Pentti Kareoja – is a handsome building with a red façade made up of ceramic tiles in different shades, a symbol of the colourful life inside the building.

Co-creating a sustainable and smart building

In addition to advancing social wellbeing and alleviating loneliness, another key objective was to give residents the opportunity to fulfil their individual needs and ideas, and to express themselves creatively in the context of an apartment building. Residents made a significant creative contribution to the overall look and design of the building and common areas. We also wanted to build ecologically sustainable, high-quality housing at a reasonable cost. As future residents – those paying the eventual energy bills – we were given the opportunity to make long-term decisions on construction, and were eager to choose energy-efficient options.

Transforming the idea of a small circle of friends into a construction project worth over €20 million (£17.5 million) was a huge endeavour. We put together our own capital and mortgages as well as those of our neighbours, responding to everyone's dreams of better housing and aspirations for life as a community. We organised, studied models around the world, defined our goals, negotiated the lease of a plot with the city, promoted the project and recruited more people, found designers, project managers and funding, created ▸

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"The social fabric of Malta House resembles a traditional country village. Not everyone is close personal friends, but everyone knows their neighbours"

modalities for governance and decision-making, found solutions to unprecedented problems. We also learned to know and trust each other, reach consensus, celebrate and share meals, becoming a community long before the building was finished.

Life in the urban village

Our lifestyle in Malta House can be described as modern cohousing. This model originated in Denmark in the late 1960s and has spread to Sweden, Germany, England, the US and other parts of the world. The basic idea is that residents have their own homes where they can live in complete privacy as they wish. Community life comes as an option on top of this, and all participation is voluntary.

For the purpose of communal activities, Malta House has over 500 m² (5,382 sq ft) of well-designed and equipped common spaces. These include a common hall/dining room of around 140 m² (1,507 sq ft) and a professional kitchen. The top (10th) floor of the house is all common space, including a den, a guest room, an orangery, extensive outdoor terrace areas and, of course, our traditional Finnish *sancto sanctorum*: the saunas. The house has a common laundry, hobby and workshop facilities, and a pleasant courtyard. The basic principle for using these shared facilities is that they are always available to all residents unless someone has reserved them for a private occasion.

All this results in savings. For example, when we heat our common saunas instead of individual saunas (in Finland, even the smallest apartments may include a sauna), or when dinner is cooked on the common stove instead of in numerous private kitchens, energy is saved. Not everyone needs their own drill or sewing machine when they can find one in a shared workshop.

Over the past nine years, community life has taken many forms, with concerts, poetry events, pop-up restaurants, yoga, film nights, gymnastics and dance classes, craft clubs, reading circles and countless private and community parties taking place in the common spaces. The social fabric of Malta House resembles a traditional country village. Not everyone is close personal friends, but everyone knows their neighbours. Shared spaces are somewhere between private and public, and provide a low-effort place to meet, such as on a Friday evening, when we sit down for a common meal and catch up over a glass of wine with our neighbours.

There is also a lot of invisible cooperation between neighbours. Several pre-existing communities moved into the house together: families in three generations; old friends; cousins and their families; and families of young children who knew each other beforehand. The years of planning and living here have also led to many new friendships. People have developed strong mutual trust, which is manifested, for example, in the way we lend things to each other: everything from bottles of wine and kitchen utensils to apartments and cars. If someone falls ill, their shopping and errands get taken care of and, when travelling, one can always rely on finding someone to water the plants and pet-sit.

Families with children have organised themselves to provide transport, activities, childcare and meals; indeed, this was a significant part of my motivation for starting the project, although by the time the building

was finished my own children were teenagers. On the other hand, my elderly and ailing parents also moved into Malta House. Their lives are rich and vibrant even if they do not spend much time outside their homes anymore; neighbours drop by, there is always something interesting happening to engage them and if they were to have an emergency, there would always be help available.

All in all, we have come to witness that the village can be reinvented. Ordinary people can learn to work consciously together, take on big projects and make a real difference to their lives and the lives of those around them. An urban environment can be transformed from alien, unwelcoming or even hostile, to interesting, rich, safe and nurturing. Most importantly, being rooted in a meaningful community and interacting with it is not only a means to ease the burdens of everyday life, but a deeply satisfying goal in itself.

From consumers to makers of our own fate

Malta House was the first apartment-building-scale cohousing project in Finland to be developed by the residents themselves, but not the last. Currently, there are about half a dozen finished similar projects in Helsinki and several more in the pipeline. Although cohousing is still a relatively small phenomenon, it is attracting great interest among citizens, the media and policymakers. Creating intentional communities is a means to tackle complex personal and societal problems that even the most advanced publicly provided social services cannot solve, such as structural loneliness and the toll it takes on people's mental health, the heavy workload of the nuclear family, age-related isolation and the safety of local communities.

In Finland – where 70% of people own their own homes – the middle class has become increasingly frustrated with its position as mere consumers in the cyclical and highly speculated housing market. A group of future residents organising itself to take on responsibility for developing their own housing is a concrete way for ordinary citizens to take the lead.

On a more philosophical level, intentional community reflects the transformation of the forces that drive humanity. For centuries, human development has been outlined as a series of turning points in which decisive steps have been taken by the actions or insights of great individuals. Today, there is increasing consensus that the future forces of change will come from communities rather than from individual great minds: from people joining forces and visions to take control of an area of life or to create something new.

Recent global crises have also made redundant the idea that we can be safe and sound in some form of private, secluded paradise whose gates shut out the world and its problems. Solving problems that transcend all borders, sharing scarce resources in meaningful ways and taking responsibility for local wellbeing is a joint effort.

Another utopia or a movement of hope?

In the 15 years that I have been working with cohousing projects, I have encountered suspicion, prejudice and outright cynicism. I have heard warnings about how these projects are bound to end in failure, "just as utopian communities always have". However, the oldest Danish and Swedish cohousing projects have been in operation for around 50 years and have fulfilled the goals of economic, social and environmental sustainability as well as human wellbeing on which they were built. And the intentional community movement is not limited to these countries. Similar projects are being built at an accelerating pace in other parts of the world. In the US, cohousing communities have created the American Cohousing Association, of which about 170 completed communities are members, and there are almost as many more in the pipeline.

A key challenge to making intentional housing more widespread is finding ways to develop models that are accessible to people on lower incomes. In Finland, the model is based 100% on home ownership and requires private citizens to take on quite a significant responsibility and risk. In Sweden, however, where it is much more common to rent, some active, visionary people have organised and managed to persuade their local government-owned rental housing companies to build houses similar to Malta House, with similar facilities and activities, for renters.

These projects are born and thrive on the willpower and vision of the people who ultimately wish to live there and are inevitably bottom–up. Local and central government can and should play a supportive role. For example, local government in Helsinki did this by allotting land and the Finnish government has passed legislation aimed at making it more secure for banks to give loans to these projects.

The major challenges we face are similar all over the world, as are the deep basic needs of people across cultures and societies: to belong and live meaningful lives in safe and sustainable conditions. Communal solutions for housing and everyday life could, I believe, become a more common response to these challenges; the spread of intentional communities can be seen as a movement of hope and the signal of an emerging megatrend. ■

Artwork by **Alex Weaver** for the RSA. *alexthomasweaver.com*

BEHIND THE FAÇADE

Learnings from King Charles's Poundbury and Nansledan developments go beyond aesthetics

by Alistair Barr

Housebuilding in the UK is at a crisis point. Government targets for new homes are missed and new schemes lack a sense of community. Many residents have no pride in the places where they live. In November 2022, Michael Gove told the Centre for Policy Studies, "The experience for many buyers is that incredibly expensive homes that they buy simply aren't up to the standards that they should be. In responding to these issues, we need definitions of good practice and precedents to improve design." While much has been written about good examples in popular and academic articles, two schemes with learning opportunities are often dealt with superficially: Poundbury, Dorset and Nansledan, Cornwall, two developments commissioned by King Charles when he was Prince of Wales.

Poundbury is a town extension of Dorchester, Dorset launched in 1993. By 2026 it will have 2,000 homes, 4,000 residents and 2,000 people employed in businesses integrated in the community. Nansledan is the extension of Newquay, Cornwall, begun in 2014. When complete (in around 30 years) it will have 4,000 homes, 8,000 residents and 4,000 employment opportunities.

Prince Charles, as he then was, defined his vision (consistently from 1993, it must be said) as mixed-use, mixed-income neighbourhoods within walking distance of shops, leisure and community facilities and green spaces. 35% of the homes in Poundbury will be 'affordable', which the government defines as 80% of the market price in a given area. Many developers try to reduce provision of 'affordable' housing, relegating it to lower-quality sites or building to a lower quality. Poundbury, by contrast, fully embraces the mixed-income model and its homes are 'tenure blind', which means no visual differences exist between market and affordable homes.

Aspirations such as these are those that every housebuilder should commit to, yet, despite the many positive qualities of Poundbury and Nansledan, they are more often criticised than lauded. Is this because of their insistence on traditional building styles in a context where, too often, the housing debate is narrowed to the binary one of traditional versus modern? The Victorians called such architectural debate the 'style wars'. Today, this either/or approach helps no one. What we need is a both/and approach, and to consider more deeply the complexity of modern housing beyond aesthetics and the relevance of the Poundbury and Nansledan models on other housing schemes.

A vision and a plan

Léon Krier, the master planner from Luxembourg who was appointed to design Poundbury, used

Alistair Barr founded award-winning architects and urbanists Barr Gazetas in 1993. He currently teaches architecture at Anglia Ruskin University, is a design review panel member of the Design Council and a Director of the Academy of Urbanism

Above: Queen Mother Square, Poundbury, Dorset

a masterplan and design codes to control the development process. His work was in line with the New Urbanism ideas that emerged from the US in the 1980s, as expressed by the Charter of New Urbanism. Both theories promoted walkable neighbourhoods, mixed use and places that formed communities.

The Prince's Foundation for Building Communities is the vehicle used to commission, brief and oversee all aspects of the development process. The commercial developers who partner with the Foundation are local and agree to comply with the Design and Community Code written by Krier and enforced by the Foundation. The Code also applies to residents, with the goal of controlling the appearance of the private residences by regulating elements such as extensions, alterations, satellite dishes and so on. Some argue that the Code goes too far, controlling even details such as paint colours, front door ironmongery and signage. I believe that, if you know what you have signed up for, this results in a positive visual contribution. After all, Georgian developers were doing this from 1714 onwards, and we still admire their work in Edinburgh, Harrogate, Bath and many other locales across the UK.

Currently, houses in Poundbury achieve 29% more value than nearby similar properties, and Nansledan is following that trend. CREATE Streets have done extensive research into the design of Nansledan, including a survey published in 2018 showing that "occupants appreciate the many benefits to belonging within a well-built, mixed-use, mixed-ownership community". These achievements are way beyond the ambition and execution of most commercial housing developers. This is Charles's design legacy: to remind us that there is a better way to build new mass housing and to learn lessons that can be applied to all town extension and new town schemes.

In 2021, Charles announced a new, landscape-led town extension on Duchy of Cornwall land near Faversham, Kent. 'South East Faversham' will provide 2,500 homes designed by Ben Pendreath Architects, a firm that has been involved in Poundbury for many years, with an "aspiration" of bringing 2,500 jobs to the area. Early images indicate the same traditional/classical mix of styles established in Poundbury and Nansledan will be used in the new scheme in Kent.

What the detractors say

The question that arises is: are the new schemes able to respond to the changes that have impacted almost every part of community life in the 30 years since Poundbury was launched?

Although Charles's ideas appeared radical in 1993, they are a continuation of longstanding theories about urbanism, such as those expounded by Gordon ▸

"The time is right to capitalise on new attitudes to producing good housing"

Above: Nansledan development near Newquay, Cornwall

Cullen in his 1961 book, *Townscape*. Cullen said design should be people-centric, using urban forms that are varied and around routes as a primary generator of form. Danish architect and visionary Jan Gehl believed that spaces should come first and the buildings follow them.

In 1984, Charles was frustrated that the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) did not want to discuss his ideas about modern architecture. Speaking at a 150th anniversary event for the RIBA at Hampton Court Palace, he said, "For far too long, it seems to me, some planners and architects have consistently ignored the feelings and wishes of the mass of ordinary people in this country." Famously, he described the proposed extension to the National Gallery at Trafalgar Square as "a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend".

While much of the criticism was valid, its tone and delivery perhaps served to close people's minds to Charles's sensible ideas about placemaking and community. This controversy was also inflamed by the appointment of Krier. While Krier had published many books about learning from past settlements and neighbourhoods, sparking a rich debate about how urban areas work when successfully designed around good public realm, he unfortunately also published a 1983 book about Albert Speer, Hitler's favourite architect. The book, based on Krier's research and interviews with Speer, discussed the overlap between architecture and politics, and was largely received as a defence of Speer. This provided another reason for critics to be suspicious of Krier's masterplan and designs, whatever their admirable points.

Recognise the benefits, relax the dogma

As the detractors attacked, the traditionalists/classicists retreated to dogma and the style battle lines were drawn. In more recent years, though, the tide of resentment from architects and critics appears to be turning, however slowly. In June 2011, *The Guardian*'s Rowan Moore said of Poundbury's obsession with classical styles, "Personally it makes my flesh creep... but I can see that it works well, and is much better than the average housebuilder's wares." Moore's successor at *The Guardian*, Oliver Wainwright, wrote in October 2016 that, although Poundbury had been mocked as a "feudal Disneyland", just "strip away the fancy dress and you find a place that far exceeds the sophistication achieved by any modern housebuilder".

If we could just leave the fancy dress debates behind, there is so much to learn from these developments. While we need design teams to be more pluralistic for the good of future housing, the debate needs to become less stylistic and both deeper and more nuanced. This is a question of working with the either/or attitude and embracing good ideas, wherever they come from.

In the UK, this process could be furthered by new government legislation on design coding, which is helping define housing design principles, visions, context and sense of place.

While design coding application is used across the world in many different situations, the UK government has begun the Design Code Pathfinder Programme, with the aim of creating a more intelligent and agile planning permission system. The big difference is that this new Code promotes local context and references, empowering local communities while remaining agnostic about style.

The time is right to capitalise on new attitudes to producing good housing, and this should include bringing new designers to Charles's Foundation. For example, Wayne Hemingway, a punk fashion designer who has engaged with housing problems, is changing housebuilding from the inside with his award-winning work with Wimpey's (a 760-home development on the banks of the River Tyne) in Staiths South Bank, Gateshead. Almost all of Hemingway's urban design principles echo Charles's and Krier's, with the

exception of the traditional style. He should join the Prince's Foundation team to keep the codes but dilute the classical bias.

The Foundation's commitment to sustainability is excellent but could be more radical. 500 homes are being built in the Climate Innovation District, Leeds, in a landscape-led, mixed-use scheme directed by the architect/developer Jonathan Wilson of Citu. These are creating exciting UK housing sustainability precedents, and Citu are very close to achieving Passivhaus standards (rigorous energy-efficient design standards for buildings that maintain an almost constant temperature) in their developments. One of the Foundation's next phases could aim to also achieve these standards, serving as an example to all.

Since 1989, Peter Barber has been creating radical social housing which takes traditional models and reimagines them in a modern way. These projects are delivered to strict cost criteria but achieve delight and sophistication alongside a sense of community. His contemporary take on housing would be an interesting catalyst on the next phases of the Foundation's work, and there are many other innovative housing architects such as those cited here who could add diversity to the Foundation's proposals

In a 2018 article in *Architectural Digest*, Ben Pendreath of the aforementioned Ben Pendreath Architects suggested that the Foundation is open to more diversity in styles. Assuming that Charles will now have to step back from the Foundation, whoever follows should allow for greater flexibility in style; adding more designers and updating some of the philosophies is simple to achieve and develops all the principles without compromising them.

New phases of Poundbury, Nansledan and Faversham could replace the obsession with the traditional and instead embrace innovation to create more relevant precedents. This would be a worthy outcome to 30 years of learning about building communities on Duchy of Cornwall land. The Foundation should maximise their engagement in the wider housing debate, while critics need to be open to acknowledging where these developments have been successful. The Prince's Foundation for Building Community has achieved so much in creating mixed-income, mixed-use integrated communities, showing that, by working with government rules for affordable housing, inclusive places can be built. Their projects are commercially successful and demonstrate to other housebuilders that affordable provisions can enrich a scheme. If the Foundation used a wider range of designers, higher sustainability standards and a pluralistic attitude to style, their influence on housing schemes could be even more fundamental. ■

RSArchive

In May 1926, the RSA initiated a scheme that would facilitate "the preservation of ancient cottages" across the UK. Between 1927 and 1953, the Society undertook three successful sets of restorations, the most ambitious of these taking place between 1929, when the Society purchased the entire 17th-century village of West Wycombe, in Buckinghamshire, and 1934, when the completely restored village was handed over to the National Trust for permanent preservation.

An August 1933 article in ***RSA Journal*** detailed the reconditioning of West Wycombe to date, describing how all the village's 60 buildings were "modernised" and provided with electricity and drainage systems, gardens were divided and fenced, and "enormous quantities of rubbish" removed throughout the village. The article noted that some buildings were repurposed for community benefit, such as one of the inns, which had its ground level converted to two shops and a "village reading room", and a formerly "rat-infested butcher shop" which was converted into a "delightful tea and guest house".

To read the original article, visit: https://bit.ly/3kDgEIP

Artists and communities are key to creating the places we need

by Cara Courage

THE ART OF PLACEM

Dr Cara Courage is a placemaking consultant, researcher and publisher

I am a placemaker. While often defined in various ways, to me, placemaking is an ethos matched with a set of tools that puts a local community front and centre of the processes of determining what their place looks like and how it functions.

If local people are not at least on equal terms with the architects, planners, designers, developers and others of place processes, then it is not placemaking. As the Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk once told me: "The community is the expert in their own lives."

Art is central to placemaking. Art and artists are integral to engaging people and making material, social and economic change in areas that have been overlooked in recent years. Critically, the art in placemaking requires local people to co-create it.

Artist Frances Whitehead is internationally known for her innovative work integrating art and sustainability. In 2006, her initiative, 'What Do Artists Know?', detailed the wide slate of crucial abilities artists can bring to the practice of placemaking. Hands-on problem-solving, reinterpreting technical issues, finding patterns where others may not and looking anew at metrics and evaluation – all these skills are fundamental to successful placemaking.

Whitehead's work includes the SLOW Cleanup programme for abandoned gas stations, which evolved through Chicago's Embedded Artist Project. Her projects foster civic engagement and help make the concept of sustainability more tangible to the public.

Van Heeswijk and Whitehead are just two examples of artists who are organically forming into a community of practice, gathering around shared concerns, interests and goals. Their work encourages people to renew their connection to where they live, to ask questions, to empower themselves, to intervene in planning and policy, to change infrastructure and impact the cultural, social and economic life of their neighbourhoods. They throw a spotlight on the entry points for communities to get involved and they hold

space for all those experts in place to make their collaborative way through complex, contested and tough issues.

Making connections

This emphasis on partnerships and connections is another essential component of placemaking, ensuring that approaches are informed by combining and sharing knowledge, understanding, goals and agendas. For example, in the UK, The Stove Network, an artist-led community project, collaborates with people in Dumfries to re-vision the social, natural and built elements of where they live. There are specialists, of course – including artists, ecologists, radicals, environmentalists, archaeologists, architects and historians – but they are equal partners in a creative conversation with the community. Stove Network's projects range from community-led city regeneration capital projects to a café-art space to creative consultation on local plans.

In Certain Places is a partnership and research project that has been working with artists since 2003 in the northern English city of Preston. Here, the aim is to engage with the complexities of place in creative and critical ways. The work spans a range of art forms and includes temporary public artworks, architectural commissions, artist residencies, public talks, discussions, events and publications. In Certain Places is based at the University of Central Lancashire and has a strong research element to its work. Over the past two decades, funding has come from a diverse range of partners in local and central government, the Arts Council and various charities. It was described by a former chief executive of the city council as "part of the DNA of the city".

Placemaking and the pandemic

Placemaking is playing a significant role in helping towns and cities recover from the pandemic. The Arts Council England and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport recognise this, and recently funded the Cultural Compacts Initiative, which covers 20 pan-regional placemaking partnerships working to boost economic and post-pandemic recovery.

"We are all placemakers and have a role to play in finding solutions to the challenges we face now and in the future"

Take A Part, an arts project for communities in Plymouth, is an exemplar of the social, civic and economic transformation possible in placemaking; it was able to remain open during lockdowns due to its deep relationships with local food banks, schools, housing associations and migrant support agencies forged over a long period of time. During the pandemic, its activity included art and food packs for families and frontline workers, and a community magazine written by residents and delivered to more than 6,000 homes.

A call to action

Place, of course, is where we live, work and play. Everyone can be a placemaker.

The challenges we face now and in the future, whether the cost-of-living crisis, housing poverty or climate and ecological breakdown (to name but three), are not just someone else's problem to fix. All of them have a place aspect. Placemaking asks us all to be active in place with our neighbours and fellow citizens. Genuine co-creation requires power- and knowledge-sharing, building trust and social cohesion. Genuine placemaking, when understood not as 'anything that the arts does in place' but as a radical equitable exercise that gives local people a stake and a voice, can connect people through shared values and goals, mobilise us into action, and scale up our collective localised efforts to give everyone a chance to fulfil their potential. ■

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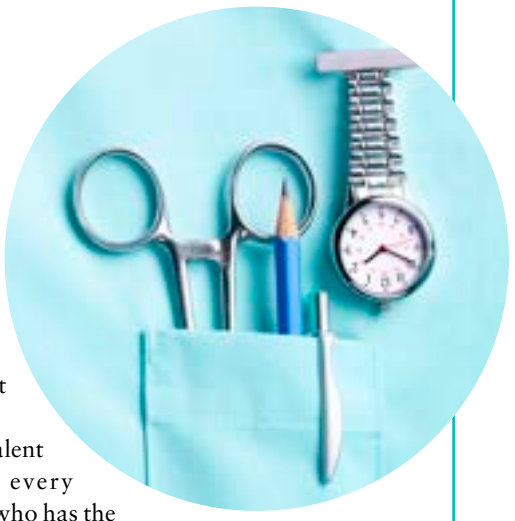
SCHOOLS NEED NURSES

by Sam Everington GP



Schools and society are not creating happy, healthy 18-year-olds, ready to meet the challenges of the modern world.

Some of the health statistics on our youth make grim reading. 31% of 11-year-olds are overweight or obese, 25% of adolescent girls self-harm, and nearly a quarter of five-year-olds have tooth decay, with an average of three to four teeth affected. During the pandemic, the percentage of children in the UK with mental health problems increased from 12% to 17%. When I trained as a doctor 40 years ago, Type 2 diabetes was a disease of the elderly; now we see it in teenagers.

This does not just impact on children's poor health, but also on their educational achievement. In East London, where I work as a GP, the children with health issues are almost always the same children who underachieve at school. In response to this, our Bromley by Bow Health Centre has over a hundred different projects under its roof, addressing the wider determinants of health: family finance, the environment, education, employment, creativity and the healthcare I learnt at medical school. For over two years, we have also had a food bank (that counts nurses among its users), one of many in London's East End now supporting one out of every 50 families. But most of these projects are aimed at adults and particularly the elderly.

If we are to improve the poor health of our children, we need social prescribing health projects in every school, where children spend 190 days a year. In our part of London, the GPs run the school nursing service as part of their social enterprise, but the resource is only enough for one whole-time equivalent nurse for every six schools.

We need a nurse or equivalent in every school and on every governing board – someone who has the wider skillset to manage all the social, physical and psychological determinants of health. They need to be on the governing board to articulate the main ambition of parents (that their children are happy and healthy) and of schools (that their pupils fulfil their maximum educational potential).

One secondary school in Tower Hamlets, which has a GP from our partnership as Chair of Governors, also has a ground-breaking social prescribing project. In Oxford, the local authority is supporting a school nurse in every secondary school. The amazing charity Place2Be supports mental health projects in many schools around the country, as does the Healthy Schools Project. The offer, though, is variable across the country. What is needed are the resources, the nurses or equivalent, and a desire to invest in our future generation. 'Nurses', as I have defined above, could be recruited from mums and dads interested in a mainly term-time job.

We all need to support equitable funding between generations. My son says our generation have good pensions, mortgages, housing and have been greatly responsible for global warming, and we were protected during the pandemic, all at the cost of the younger generation. He is right. It is time for the older generation to invest in this world's future generations. ■

Sir Sam Everington has been a GP in Tower Hamlets (East London) since 1989 at the Bromley by Bow Centre. He is a 2022 recipient of the RSA's Albert Medal, awarded in recognition of his innovative work to improve the way local healthcare services support patients

Image: Getty images

POLICY PROGRESS

Putting users at the centre of social service design

by Sean Kline and Jim Pugh

When a family in the US runs into hard times financially, the country's social safety net should be there to catch them. But what the safety net promises and what it delivers are vastly different. While, sometimes, families struggle to receive the assistance they need because social services provide insufficient support, often families simply cannot access the existing support for which they are eligible. The Covid-19 pandemic brought this into stark relief, as millions of Americans struggled to access unemployment insurance, stimulus checques and rental assistance.

This is not just terrible for individual families; it affects the dynamism of the economy a generation from now. Strengthening public services for those who need them most is central to our resiliency and ability to respond to the economic, technological and environmental challenges on the horizon.

One fundamental problem is that benefits policies have traditionally been designed by people far removed from those needing assistance; while a growing number of people recognise the need for change, top–down approaches to policy design are still deeply embedded in the US's existing systems. Policymakers and administrators have missed the cardinal rule of service design: centring the user.

This guiding principle is what lies behind the RSA's decision to co-found the Benefits Access and Equity (BAE) Initiative in 2022 with the Economic Security Project, Universal Income Project and End Poverty in California. This initiative is focused on the challenges and opportunities California faces to strengthen its safety net and, in turn, the economic security of its residents and the dynamism of its economy.

To kick off the initiative, BAE convened policymakers, frontline service providers, senior benefits administrators, union representatives and those with lived expertise navigating the complex and psychologically taxing benefits system. As anyone who has facilitated diverse stakeholders understands, creating an authentic space for the voices of those with the least power requires deliberate design and purposeful effort. To ensure an inclusive process, BAE compensated those with lower incomes for their time and expenses, used processes and structures that enabled people to engage as peers, and encouraged all participants to use simple clear language, avoiding alienating acronyms and jargon. Most importantly, BAE aimed to give participants ownership over the design process and the solutions it produced.

Using inclusive design processes developed by the Design Council in the UK, BAE collaborators harvested insights to identify high-level concepts that county governments – those responsible for benefits in California – may be able and willing to test. BAE is now in conversation with San Francisco and Los Angeles counties about pilot-testing two innovative benefit models emerging from its stakeholder design process. One of these models would waive the requirement of recipients to recertify their eligibility for benefits and supplement benefits with regular unconditional cash payments – a guaranteed basic income – to bring the level of support up to the poverty line and regulate benefit flow for participants. A second model would recruit and train individuals already enrolled in a benefit programme as 'navigators' to help those new to government support access benefits and other essential resources offered by the county. ■

Sean Kline is the Director of Policy and Innovation, RSA US. **Jim Pugh** is Co-founder of the Universal Income Project

HOMETOWN GLORY

One Fellow's place-based approach to creating change in her hometown of Chesterfield

by Clare Gage

I launched Create Change Chesterfield (CCC) in 2019 with the goal to create a positive change in our world by helping to build a community of changemakers. I felt strongly that the way to support action by individuals was to offer opportunities for communities to come together face-to-face for inclusive, creative events that empowered people to share ideas for creating change.

It felt important to ground this activity in my hometown of Chesterfield. What drew me to this place-based approach was simply that I know my hometown (where people like to meet, the transport system, the landscape of local government, local community groups). I could use this knowledge to tailor events specifically to the needs of local people.

When planning what CCC would look like, I decided to first tackle practical aspects such as accessibility. For example, CCC events were free and scheduled on Sundays to make it easier for those who work Monday through Friday to attend. We provided free lunch and childcare on the day, both a crèche for younger children and creative workshops for older children so they could feel part of the discussions that were taking place among the adults.

CCC launched with a community event held in March 2019. This was supported by the RSA and welcomed over 50 people from ages eight to 80, an encouraging level of interest as a starting point! The event was lively and creative, sparking fascinating conversations and connections. I used a feedback-led model in which subsequent events would be designed based on the topics of greatest interest and importance to the community.

On that first day, participants discussed exploring action around the climate emergency and what deliberative democracy might look like at a local level. Our second event was designed as a 'citizen assembly experience' with a focus on climate, and over 70 people came together to discuss how we could effect change as a community. Our third event (scheduled for March 2020) was designed to explore methods of communication and an action plan to bring more people along with us on the journey of addressing the climate emergency. Unfortunately, the pandemic forced the cancellation of this event and CCC entered a period of hibernation.

The enforced hiatus gave me time to reflect on the model we had created. All the work so far had been done on volunteer hours, including my own. I realised we needed to move on from exclusively volunteer action for CCC events to be consistent, and to keep volunteers from burning out or overextending themselves in the short term. Furthermore, the volunteer-only model is not sustainable if we hope to create a culture of social action which supports everyone to be involved and has diversity and inclusion at the heart.

The future of CCC will be determined by partnership working and engaging with established local third-sector organisations, reducing the reliance on volunteer hours. To this end, we are talking to Community Chesterfield, an innovative partnership between Derbyshire Voluntary Action and the University of Derby, to explore a collaboration of ideas and plan for CCC to start up again in 2023. ■

To learn more, visit createchangechesterfield.blogspot.com

Clare Gage is a designer/maker and pottery tutor. Her voluntary work explores using creative experiences to build community and explore social action

Images: istock

When I was uprooted to Ireland in 2014, I wasn't sure what to expect. I only knew the country through Cecelia Ahern's stories, which filled my bookcase in Damascus. I left those books and other parts of me back home during the Syrian war in 2012, moving first to Egypt, and later to Ireland on a job offer.

As I settled in, I realised how challenging it would be to call this place, with all its unfamiliarities, home. Around the first Christmas, I got asked occasionally and casually whether I was travelling back home for the holidays. It was this innocent question that repeatedly forced me to remember that I couldn't go back home, that I am not allowed to go back home and that I don't have a home to go back to.

Surrounded by paper borders that prevented me from visiting my family or friends overseas, I became obsessed with the word 'home': the physical place, the dearest people, the native language, the authentic recipes and the memories of 'firsts'. That complicated formula that opens a portal to home. I turned into a mad scientist, desperately trying to unravel the secret ingredient to heal my soul from the unbearable nostalgic pain.

But when Patricia, my Irish landlady, learned about my situation, she arrived the next day holding a cardboard box with a folded Christmas tree, a light cable and colourful decorations. She also handed me an envelope with a Christmas card and a hidden amount of cash. It was then that I began to appreciate how this country is home in many remarkable ways.

Focusing on what things we have in common instead of what makes us different was one way to look at all of this: our kindness to strangers, our sense of humour (aka the 'craic'), our love of food and family gatherings, and our long histories of wars, occupation, division and diaspora. The Irish know what it means to lose, to miss and to not be able to reach, home.

It might sound odd, but Tayto, the famous Irish crisp brand, illustrates a lot of this unexplainable home sentiment. Reflecting Ireland's civil war, it split into two brands, just like the country did. We Syrians have our own sentimental crisp: Derby. This was the first – and for many years the only – crisp in Syria. With classic green and red packaging and one flavour (paprika), it became an icon for the familiarity of home and childhood. Although it didn't split into two brands like Tayto, the Syrian war forced its manufacture to move outside Syria, eventually changing the original package and flavour, not unlike the changes forced upon the Syrian diaspora.

In 2021, Irish citizenship gave me another chance in life, almost like an organ transplant. I still haven't exactly figured out how to find home, but I wrote a book about it that helped ease the pain of looking. On stage at the Cheltenham Literature Festival, in conversation with Roddy Doyle and other brilliant Irish authors, someone asked me if my book would have been different if I hadn't ended up in Ireland. I think it would have been a longer and more solitary journey if it weren't for the Irish kindness and appreciation for home. ■

Suad Aldarra is a Syrian-Irish writer and data scientist. Her memoir, *I Don't Want To Talk About Home*, was shortlisted for the 2022 Irish Book Awards

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