



Understanding Social Change

Successful Cities

David Goldblatt

As an urban dweller yourself, someone who likes the city, what are you looking for in a successful liveable city?

Doreen Massey

I'm looking for a feeling of collectively, a feeling of being part of a place, though not tied in like you are in a tiny community, I'm looking for really good public infrastructure, I'm looking for a sense that goes with the collectively of egalitarianism, I mean one of the ways that we're growing at the moment is in a very polarised way, which I am sure we shall return to. I mean one of my slightly whacky criteria, I guess, is when I look at a city is how would infirm people, say over the age of seventy, how would they cope in this city, what kind of facilities are available, what's the transport like, what kind of quality lives could they live? Now that's quite a good test, I reckon.

David Goldblatt

No, it is a good test, I mean I look at it from the other end of the generational scale and say how good is this city for children, where is there to play, how safe are the streets, are they full of cars, how is the infrastructure adapted to children and people who have children, and I think actually I have to say on most counts British are pretty poor at that one.

Doreen Massey

But what we're both raising is that we can only judge the success of cities in the way we think about them by looking at different social groups and the spread of benefits through them, rather than just looking at the economic rating or something like that, and how much inward investment they've got, and whether the centre is full of glitzy coffee bars. What we're saying is what it's like to live in the very ordinary, the banal, the day-to-day places of the city for everybody.

David Goldblatt

I want to pick up on that issue of egalitarianism and the quality in universality because it seems to me that in the immediate post-war era under the Labour government 1945-1951 we do have a moment in British history where there is a sense of a commitment to egalitarianism of citizenship, of universality, and so on, and I wonder, Ken, how did that feed through into the thinking of the time about what should be done about British cities, how they should be transformed, how was that actually turned into practical proposals for urban change?

Ken Walpole

Well if you look back to the thirties and forties this is the era when the planner as a person, and particularly allied to be a scientist and technologist was a kind of hero figure, and the Labour government of 1945 was very committed to planning. The problem was a very non-reflexive kind of way of thinking about planning and it was, as it were, doing good to other people so new towns were planned, but I remember certainly some of the new towns, you know, they weren't going to be allowed to have pubs because, you know, this was thought to be actually detrimental to people's social and moral wellbeing so although the planning was very good, it was completely un-reflexive, and the needs of women, the changing demographic lifestyles that people were adopting, you know, were not taken into account. For example if you look at the new towns around London there was no provision for single persons, households. It was assumed that people would stay in the home until they grew up and then in turn would get married. The notion that there would be a diversity of household types and household architecture just wasn't there in the new town planning.

Doreen Massey

But we should remember, looking back, that one of the things that period, including the period of the thirties just before the war, and then how it got carried on afterwards, one of the things that period proved was that public provision can be excellent. I grew up on a council estate to the south of Manchester, Wythenshawe, and it's got large gardens. It was a demonstration, and it was meant quite explicitly to be a demonstration, that you could have quality provision for working class people and it really was quality, and I think we've come, you know how these stories get told and get woven, we now have this automatic association of public sector, with rather derelict housing and bad provision. It is absolutely not necessarily the case.

Can I pick up on one other thing, because another set of associations we often make these days is between planning and the bad, and I think what's important in what Ken said is that planning could also be more reflexive, it could be better, it could be more aware of needs from the grassroots if you like, I often hear people when I say I work at the Open University they say oh that's in Milton Keynes if they've got idea at all where it is, and I say yes, and the very common response is oh, Milton Keynes is artificial, and I think this is a real good social science moment, you know the social science business of saying hang on a minute, 'cos you think hang on, what's artificial – as opposed to what? As opposed to natural? Or which town in this country is natural? There are always power relations that are going to build cities, whether it's the church and the universities that built Oxford and Cambridge, finance that built the city of London, or whatever, industry that built Manchester, and our question must be not to get rid of power 'cos you can't, but how that is distributed through the processes or planning, and how ordinary people and communities, in quotes, can be brought into that process a lot more.

Ken Walpole

This is very interesting because in the last few years people are now talking about how do we integrate planning and governments together? We've got two separate things: we've got very low electoral at local elections, a disillusion with local politics, disillusion with planning, and yet somehow we have had a vision of where we want to live and how we want to live, and I think it's interesting that people are saying well let's bring these things together, democracy, consultation and planning together, and I think this is a very healthy sign.

David Goldblatt

Let me bring a third factor into the equation. It seems to me in your discussion of the post-war era that on the one hand we have issues of planning, people issuing top-down plans, ideas and so on from the new towns, and there's also a sense from what you also say that there are demographic changes going on in the era of the emergence of single person households, for example. I wonder what kind of other social forces have provided the context within which urban planners, people thinking about changing Britain's cities in the 1950's and 1960's had to contend with, there was something more going on to shape Britain's cities than just these top-down plans and/or resistance from the bottom. What were the kinds of big social forces at work at this time?

Ken Walpole

Well one of the biggest obviously was the motor car, in the sense you could say that British cities and planning in the 20th century had been dominated by the needs of the motorist.

David Goldblatt

And how has that come about and what impact has it had on British cities?

Ken Walpole

Well I mean the motor car industry is a very powerful industry and it's always had very strong links into Parliament, but also the kind of people that are planning cities often have identified themselves firstly as motorists. When we were doing the research for the book I least interviewed at least ten chief planners in British cities. One of the first questions I was asked when I got there was did you have any trouble parking? Their assumption was, from one middle-aged man to another, did you have trouble parking? Now the fact is they were planning cities that would by and largely be used by women with children, people infirm, and

so on. The notion of the walk able city just disappeared off the planning agenda fifty years ago. It's only now just beginning to come again.

David Goldblatt

Doreen, what other kind of forces, I mean the motor car is a very particular technology, but there are no doubt bigger things going on in post-war Britain that will shape what happens?

Doreen Massey

Absolutely, I mean just one of the ironies of the motor car is of course thinking back to where we began in the anti-urbanism, people's escape from the city was aided by the motor car, they all thought they were doing it to live in a greener environment, and this love of nature and the countryside, and all the rest of it, but it is the more environmentally destructive way of building cities you could possibly imagine. And precisely those issues are now beginning ever so slightly to be on the agenda, which is great. One other thing we must mention, and of course there were loads of things going on in the long post-war period, is the arrival of people, migrants from the Commonwealth, in part of course in response to desperate needs for labour in the public sector that we've been talking about, and that has changed the face of cities throughout the country, in some cities more than others, there's always a big diversity between cities, of course, but including some smaller ones, for instance, Bradford obviously, the diversity of cities and the spatial shape of cities, the kind of geographical organisation of cities has been dramatically changed....

David Goldblatt

Can you give some examples?

Doreen Massey

... by the influx, the concentration of people in different areas, and the additional cultures that are brought to cities and the increasing of cities' hybrid nature, the very fact of their mixed, which I think has been an important part of looking back over a longer period, and it's always easier to tell this emergence of a real youth culture in cities, so much of youth culture today is mixing between different ethnic traditions, and that has happened above all in cities, and I'm sure that bringing together of all those influences is precisely an example of why urban life can be so good. You meet other things, you meet other people, you get it together and other new things emerge.