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Peter J. LARKHAM and Andrew N. JONES

# Gradual urban renewal in English residential areas<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Many suburban areas in Britain show evidence of a gradual process of urban renewal, with original large houses being either demolished and their sites redeveloped, or the plots subdivided. This process produces important increases in residential density, and changes to the character of areas. This pressure to increase densities is because there is a sizeable demand for more dwellings currently evident in Britain, apparently fuelled by a reduction in the average size of households and accompanied by increases in disposable incomes, population and employment opportunities. Although this is particularly true of the South-East region, this process is evident throughout Britain. Two population groups are particularly important in this respect. These are first the young, whose rate of new household formation is high as parental homes are left earlier when studies are undertaken and jobs found. A high ratio of single-person households is found in this group, as households

formation precedes marriage. The second group is the elderly, now with increased life expectancy owing to advances in medicine. Again, there is a large number of single-person households among this group, often widows, since the average male life-span remains shorter, and males still tend to be older than females at marriage.

In Britain, all but the most minor development requires a formal permission from the local planning authority. The allowing or refusing of this permission is a key aspect of planning. This strict control over new development around existing towns and cities necessary to protect Green Belt areas, and other extensive areas of special status, such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and zones of housing restraint, all serve to concentrate new development. It has increasingly been realised that neither the large-scale urban renewal of areas of slum housing, common in the 1950s and 1960s, nor the attempts in the 1980s to produce new housing con-

centrated into new towns or new villages, have been successful. Indeed, it would seem that the main source of land for further urban development in Britain is no longer green fields. It now appears that in the South East, some two-thirds of new residential developments are within existing urban areas.<sup>2/</sup>

A recent study of the London Borough of Barnet, for example, shows that between 1987 and 1989 some 3,400 new dwellings were constructed, an increase in the housing stock of 3 per cent, yet only an extra one per cent of land was changed to residential use. An earlier study of Leeds, an area undergoing less pressure for development, showed that the processes of 'overbuilding' (creating a new curtilage within an old without demolition) and 'rebuilding' (complete replacement of earlier building) accounted for about one-quarter of the land occupied by new private (ie not local authority) residential building. There is thus an evident increase in density in existing built up-areas.<sup>3</sup> Half a decade ago, it was suggested that smaller urban sites were likely to become of increasing importance in the development process.<sup>4/</sup> It is now very evident that this is true, particularly so in those mature residential areas, developed with large detached houses on extensive plots, that lie on the fringes of many British towns. At least one cycle of urban development is already virtually complete in such areas. These areas are suburban, have high-quality townscapes, high existing use values, highly fragmented landownership, small units of land for development purposes, and are attractive for second-cycle development or 'renewal'.

The amount of pressure for development in such areas may be suggested by two surrogate variables. First, high and spatially varied houses prices would suggest that, if redevelopment occurs, it will be more intensive in areas of higher prices. Figure 1 is a crude transect survey between Birmingham and the outer London suburbs, carried out in March 1988, 1989 and 1990, showing price variations in standard universal-plan semi-detached houses.

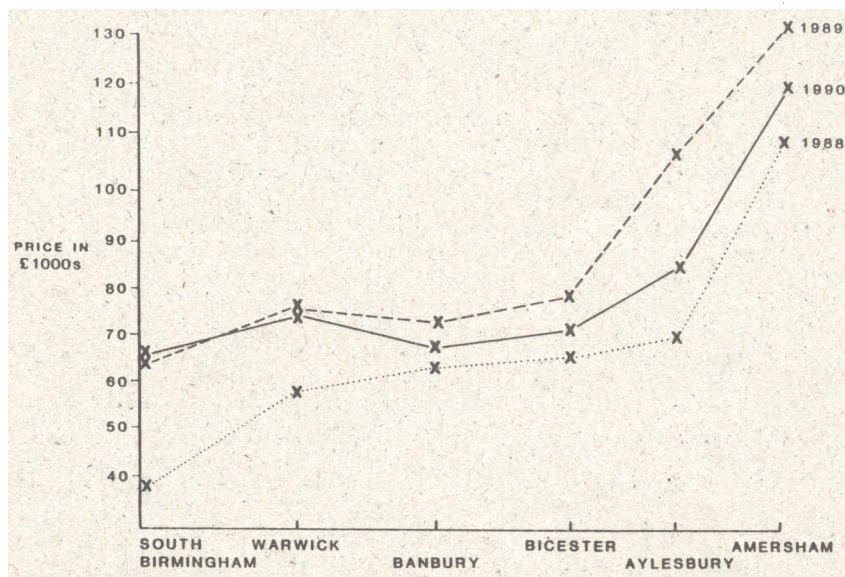


Figure 1: House price transect. Birmingham to outer London, 1988-1990 (for standard inter-war semi-detached houses).

It emphasises the sudden rise in values towards the capital. In the light of this paper, it is significant that some cases are becoming known of redevelopment becoming economically viable even on the limited sites of semi-detached houses. Secondly, a variety of aggregate statistics compiled by local planning authorities for the Department of the Environment show particular concentrations in the South-East region.

The extent of mature residential areas on the London fringe is already well known, and can be mapped for other regions of the country from the Ordnance Survey 1:25,000 sheets. A stratified random sample of eight 25 ha National Grid squares carried out in 1987 suggests that over 50% of the original plots have been affected by some form of change leading to increased residential densities. 5/ This process of gradual suburban renewal is thus of considerable significance in the last part of the twentieth century. To study the amount, types and processes of this current form of urban renewal further, a selection, from Ordnance Survey data and field surveys, of seven such 25 ha squares (Figure 2) has provided useful data. The need to examine these processes in great detail, using the records and files of planning applications held by the local planning authorities, and contacts with site owners and developers, led to the requirement for these small sample areas. Over 300 sites have been examined in detail, and well over 2,000 individual planning applications studied.

There is no suggestion that these seven areas are typical; nevertheless this study's methods and results are widely applicable to the continuing gradualistic process of residential redevelopment in Britain.

### Motivations for renewal

The motivation for virtually all urban renewal is the obsolescence, in one form or another, of the property. The motive for the large-scale redevelopment of the slum housing in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s was the structural obsolescence of this

poor-quality housing, often built over one hundred years earlier. This comprehensive redevelopment was undertaken by the local authorities, using their powers to compulsorily purchase the land and then redevelop it. The small-scale, gradualist renewal of the residential areas that were examined in this study is prompted by different considerations. Although the buildings may be old, in general they are in reasonable state of repair, and are occupied by single, relatively high-income families. However, they become obsolete in financial terms, owing usually to changed circumstances of the owner. If the owner dies, the surviving family may not need, or be able to afford, a large house: they may seek to get the highest possible financial return for the site. Use-values as individual large dwellings are relatively low: there is, as has been said, higher demand for smaller units. Thus the potential value of the site is higher if it is subdivided for many smaller units - small houses or apartments - and the original large house may be demolished. So the motivation for this type of gradualist redevelopment is undoubtedly financial. This also explains the timing of change, as families reach this stage of the family life-cycle at different times, and so development

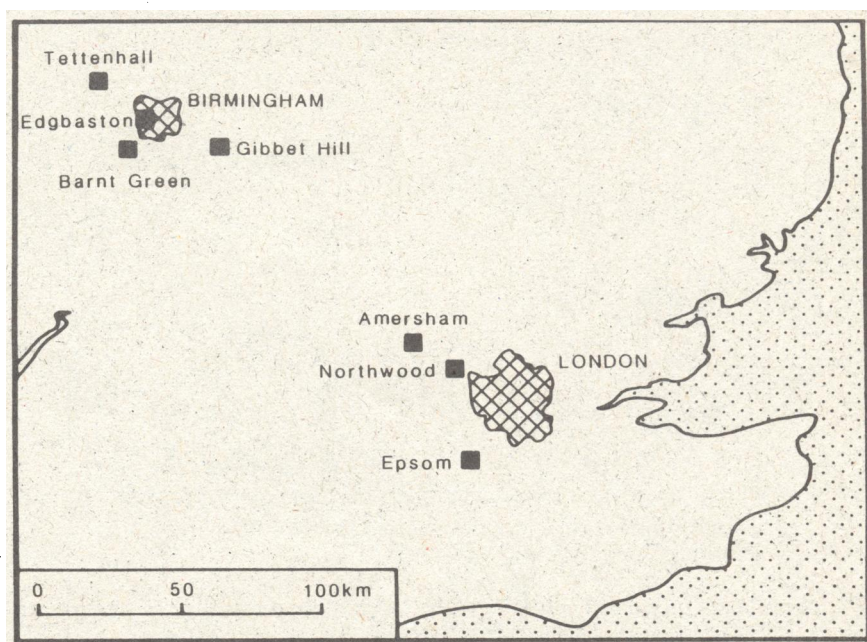


Figure 2: Study areas in the South-East Midland regions of Britain.



proceed s site-by-site, rather than with the comprehensive clearance and redevelopment approach previously used by the local authorities.

### Types of change: increasing residential density

Even in these areas of relatively large houses set on large plots, not all plots prove vulnerable for redevelopment. Two major physical characteristics of plots appear significantly to determine this vulnerability. The first of these is plot shape, particularly the width: length ratio. Corner plots often have access, or potential access, from two road frontages. Where a new access and its increased traffic would not endanger traffic movement on either road, an application for plot subdivision is often approved. Likewise, the subdivi-

vision of plots with wide frontages on to one road is often approved. Otherwise, the subdivision of a plot series to give a new plot at the rear is rarely allowed, although many applications are made. This form of subdivision is only allowed where there is adequate existing rear access to the plot, often a back alley that might be made up to the local authority's road standards (Figure 3).

The example of Brookdene Drive, in the London suburb of Northwood, is a good example of how this process of piece-by-piece development can substantially increase residential densities, and markedly change the character of the urban landscape. In 1947, this stretch of the Watford Road contained single detached dwellings with substantial grounds (Figure 4a).

Infill development in rear gardens in this area became common during the 1950s. It was the intention of the local planning authority, Ruislip-Northwood Urban District Council, to promote comprehensive development schemes for such areas, and applications on this site that might prejudice such a scheme often met refusal. The initiative for comprehensive development of the rear gardens was taken by a local developer, Paul Hurst Developments Ltd. His proposal was in outline for 14 detached houses around an access road (Figure 4b). Each plot was to be sold to individuals, who chose house designs from the developer's portfolio and made detailed planning applications. Further applications for 13 houses and for 40 flats in ten blocks were refused on the grounds of over-development. Following further negotiations, an application for 17 detached houses was submitted (Figure 4c), with an undertaking to invest money in landscaping and tree preservation. Some form of agreement was evidently reached between the local planning authority and developer, trading a higher density of single-family detached for a comprehensive scheme and better environmental quality.

Negotiations followed with adjacent owners, notably of 8 - 14 Watford Road. The owner of no. 14, reluctant to sell land to the developer, pursued a private plan to develop on the rear of his plot. Despite receiving permission, access to Brookdene Drive was not agreed and this scheme was not built (Figure 4d, shown as a dotted line). The owners of 8 and 10 Watford Road, awaiting a link to the Brookdene scheme, obtained permission to redevelop their plots with six detached houses using a temporary access on to Watford Road (Figure 4d). Although this access was unpopular with the Highway Authority, the planning authority was anxious to see the scheme complete. Three years passed with little action, until in 1965 the land was sold to the developer, apparently following the death of the owner of no. 14. An application for four further houses was made and the southern link completed (Figure 4e).

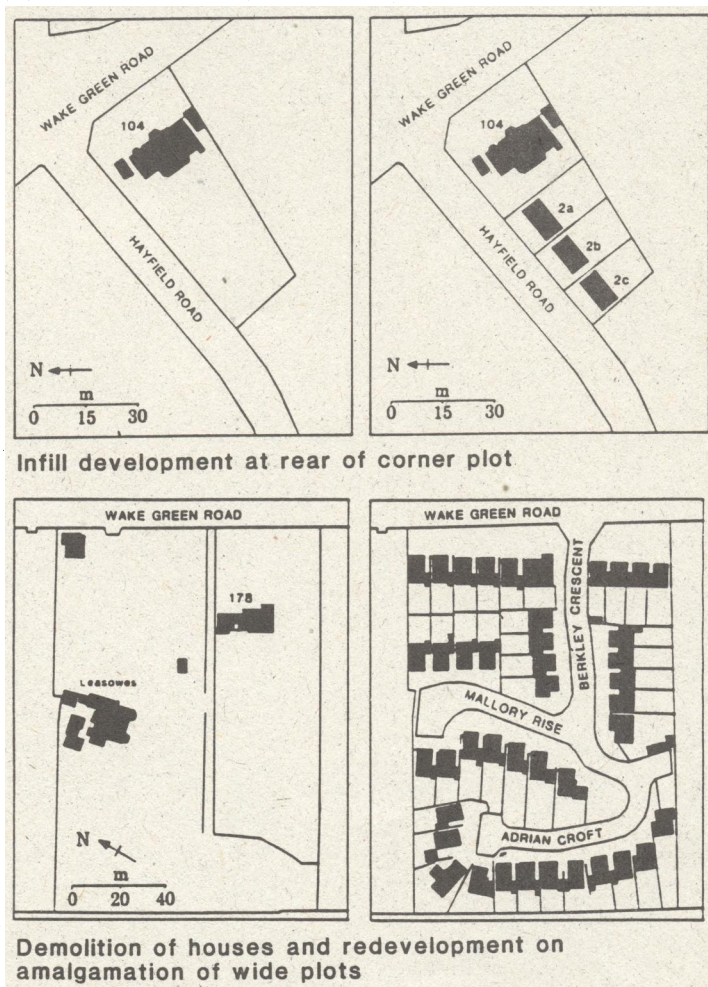


Figure 3: Types of changes to large residential plots: examples in Birmingham (source: N.D. POMPA: *The nature agents of change in the residential townscape: South Birmingham, 1970-85*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1988).

An application to extend Brookdene Drive to the north with 15 detached dwellings was made in 1965 with the agreement of all landowners of nos 26, 28 and 30 Watford Road. A subsequent application to demolish the existing houses and build 17 dwellings was also approved, as was a third proposal giving 17 units but with the retention of numbers 26 and 28. This completed the Brookdene Drive scheme (Figure 4f). It is notable example of a scheme, comprehensive in intent, but which proceeded piecemeal; there was apparent co-operation between the developer and the planning authority; owners were persuaded to join the scheme, although there was some delay owing to the intransigence of one; and, most importantly, with the exception of the anomalous application for flat development the series of planning applications shows a gradual increasing of density particularly evident in the last three proposals. In all, 47 detached dwellings were constructed on the site of 8 first-cycle houses, three of which were retained.

**Types of new dwellings in renewal developments**

These are considerable variations in the types of new dwellings proposed and constructed in the study areas. Originally developed with large houses for high status single-family occupation, all new proposals are for much smaller units. Even where detached houses are proposed, they are on a much smaller scale, reflecting both the somewhat lower social status - for these areas are now firmly middle class rather than upper-middle class - and differing social expectations of housing since the first cycle of residential development. Ironically, redevelopment with houses is often much more harmful to the character and appearance of these mature townscapes than the building of small blocks of flats, which may more nearly match the original buildings in height, mass and relationship to the plot, and may also match the architectural style of surrounding buildings. Figure 5 shows the great contrasts between the original large houses and the

'urban renewal' phase of terraced houses built in the mid-1970s in the London suburb of Hillingdon.

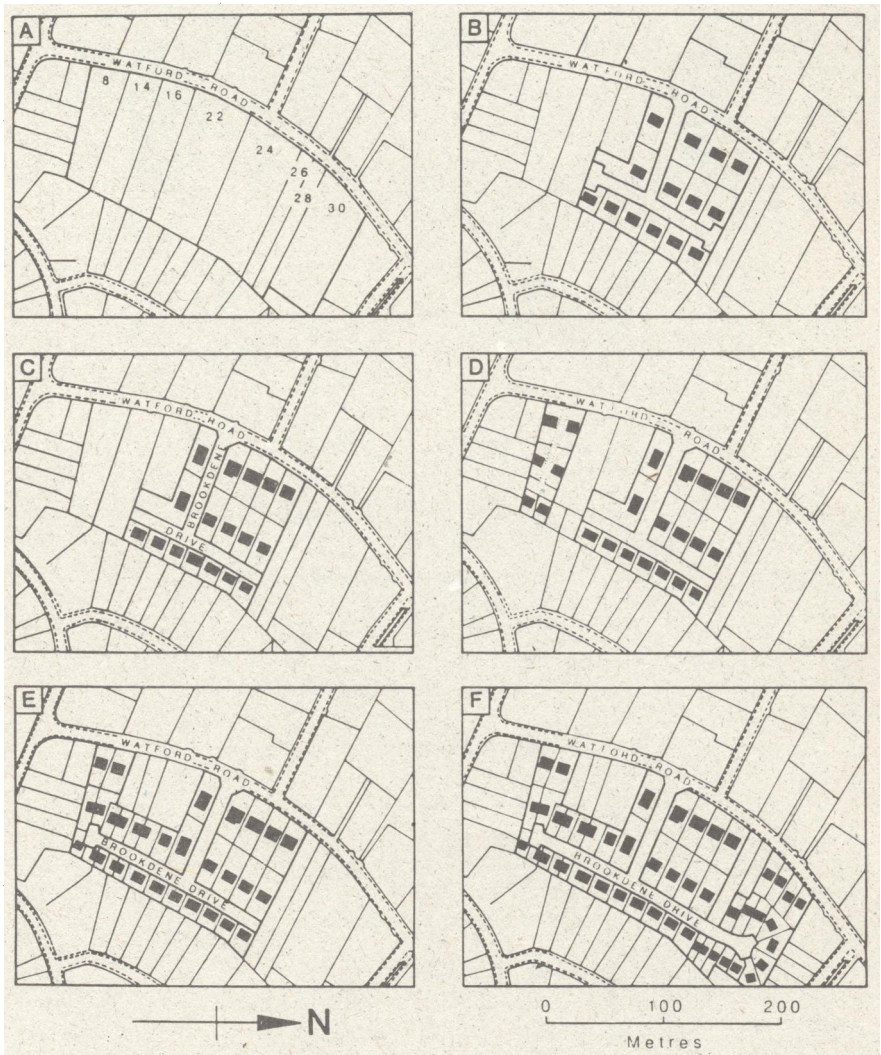


Figure 4: Development of Brookdene Drive, Northwood.



Figure 5: Contrast of original and new houses, Frithwood Avenue, Northwood (source: local authority planning files).



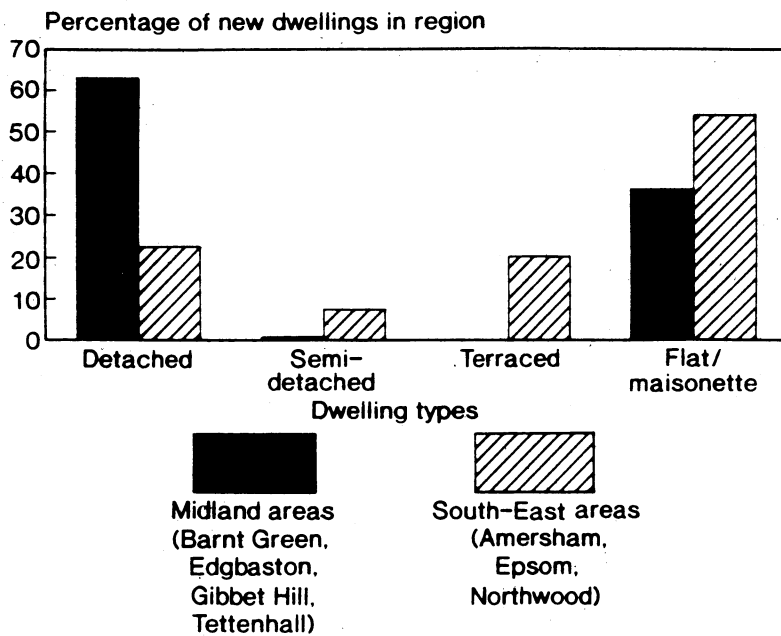


Figure 6: Percentage importance of different types of dwelling constructed in South-East and Midland regions.

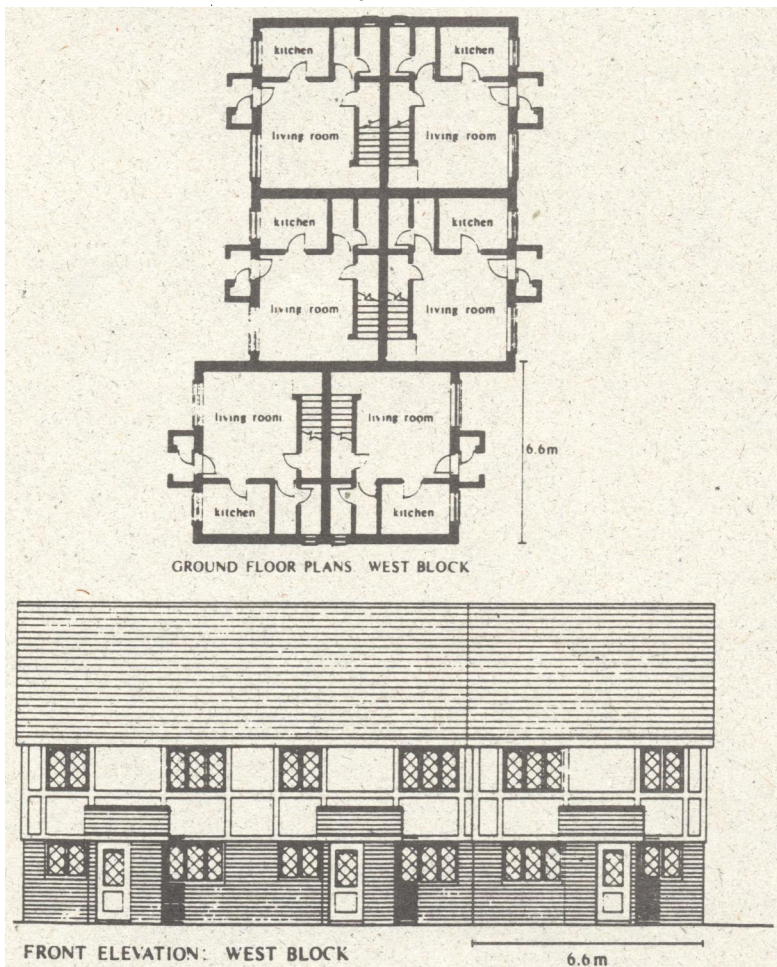


Figure 7: Proposals for redevelopment of site in Amersham, South East England, mid-1980s, showing back-to-back houses (source: J.W.R. WHITEHAND: Residential development under restraint: a case study in London's rural-urban fringe. School of Geography, University of Birmingham (1989)).

Again drawing a comparison between the South East and Midland regions, contrasts in new dwelling types are pronounced (Figure 6).

The large majority of dwellings constructed in the Midlands were detached houses, while the majority in the South East were flats and maisonettes, with back-to-back houses again popular after nearly a century of being considered sub-standard (Figure 7).

All types of applicant in the Midlands appeared to prefer detached houses. In the South East, just over half of the dwellings for which individuals made applications were detached houses. The tendency for individuals to prefer this dwelling type appears consistent with tendency for them to be less demolition-prone than development companies. It reflects the continuing interest of some owner-occupiers in the existing use-value of their houses: an extra dwelling in the garden may enable the retention of most of this value, whereas the construction of flats would almost certainly reduce markedly the desirability of the existing house as a single-family dwelling.

Yet if all development proposals are examined, rather than those successfully implemented, a slightly different picture emerges. One of the Midland areas, the Wolverhampton suburb of Tettenhall, had two distinct periods when applications for flats were noticeable. These are 1960-2 and 1971-4. The latter is in the middle of a housebuilding boom when more applications for higher-density housing are generally seen, whilst virtually all of the earlier peak is the result of applications made by an elderly lady invalid, owner of a site in Tettenhall but herself resident in Worcester. This shows the influence that one persistent applicant can have in this type of detailed case study-based research. All of her proposals, for between twelve and twenty flats, were refused planning permission on the grounds of overdevelopment, detriment to the amenities of the area, traffic generation and similar reasons. Figure 8, redrawn from a planning application, is an impression of one such proposal, refused because "the building of a six

storey block of flats on this site which is situated between two storey dwellings would be prejudicial to the amenities of those existing dwellings by reason of appearance, noise and additional traffic to the premises and would be incongruous with its setting, creating a strident feature in the street scene". 6/ Interestingly, there is no mention of the demolition of the original house either in the application (since explicit permission was not required) nor in the reasons given for refusal of the scheme.

Apartment development thus accounts for a high proportion of the new dwellings created, particularly in the South East. This is a further indicator of higher pressure for residential development in this region. High-rise development and the redevelopment of multiple plots for apartments is rare, owing to the larger number of property owners in residential areas, and the difficulty of assembling a sufficiently large site. Only where particularly influential agents of townscape change are active have such developments taken place, as in the Birmingham suburb of Edgbaston in the 1960s by the Calthorpe Estate management company, the major landowner of the area.

In addition to purpose-built apartment schemes, refurbishment and conversion of the existing housing stock has prevented a number of demolitions of original large houses. Although this conversion is often damaging to the interior features of a house, there is usually very little alteration to the facade. Townscape change is thus minimised, while providing smaller dwellings for which there is evident demand.

### Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated some evident trends in the gradual renewal of mature residential areas in Britain during the post-war period. In many cases, the impetus for development proposals is unequivocally economic, most frequently following a sudden change in the stage of the family life-cycle such as the death of the owner. The requirement for less space, the need to raise capital, or the desire of the deceased

owner's heirs to realise the highest possible value of an asset lead to the making of speculative planning applications, often proposing significant increases in residential density.

The number of sites affected by these proposals for intensification is large, and many of the proposals are successful - if not at the first attempt, then subsequently. There are fewer proposals for single than multiple dwellings, the ratio of the two types being some 7 : 9. In total, some 88 sites have been developed with one new dwelling, and 111 sites with more than one dwelling. However, of the latter group, the majority are for two and three dwelling proposals, with only a small number being for five or more dwellings. This suggests that the most numerous, and thus in one way successful, infill schemes are those for one or perhaps two new dwellings. Table 2 substantiates the view of the South East as a region of considerable development pressure. The ratio of developed to not-developed sites is much higher in that region, and it would appear that local planning authorities are putting up greater resistance to development proposals. More individual developments occur in the Midlands, but on average these proposals are smaller in scale: none approach the size of one scheme for 131 dwellings in Northwood.

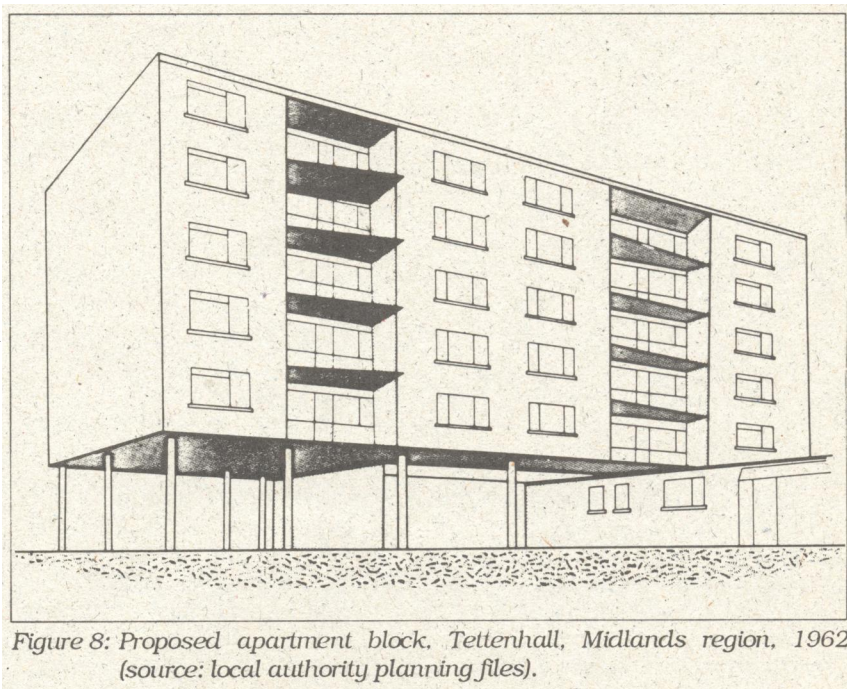


Figure 8: Proposed apartment block, Tettenhall, Midlands region, 1962 (source: local authority planning files).



These processes of increasing residential development are occurring in mature residential areas, many of which are high amenity value. Some are designated as Conservation Areas, and the individual buildings may be of considerable intrinsic architectural merit; many, for example in Edgbaston, being officially noted for their architectural and historical interest. These mature residential areas also represent a sizeable proportion of the built-up area of many cities. They thus represent a considerable resource for more intensive residential development. During periods of high prices, even the sites of Victorian semi-detached houses are vulnerable to redevelopment. The scale and nature of these processes must be understood before the considerable implications for townscape management, in these valuable but particularly vulnerable areas, can be assessed.

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Marion CHALMERS

## Policy Evaluation in Practice in Scotland

### 1. Introduction

In the UK, and many developed countries, the theme and buzz in the 1980's was urban renewal and forging public and private sector partnerships. The latter was in recognition of the fact that public agencies could not tackle the plethora of problems and decay alone.

Different tools of policy and a confusing ever-changing series of mechanisms for funding came in and out of fashion over the decade. It was a decade that out of an early deep economic recession urban economies began to revitalise and the urban environment was transformed, in certain locations quite dramatically, by regeneration of its very fabric and function.

The pace has slowed down as recession again blights progress. It is an apt time to contemplate the real successes of policy and practice.

**What form should this assessment take?** We can learn from the lessons of the past and borrow both concepts and practices from one another. To promote and understand the dynamics of urban renewal, however, the end products can only reflect the complex nature of our different cultures, economies, government systems and attitudes to the role and nature of our built environments.

This article therefore provides an insight into an approach adopted for policy evaluation and specifically policy evaluation of area-based development initiatives in Scotland. Its basis is work carried out by my company - Pieda plc - for a public agency, the Scottish Development Agency.

The work was on two levels:

- (i) Policy evaluation of individual area-based initiatives; and
- (ii) Development of an approach for use in the evaluation of all types of area-based initiative funded by the SDA.

Firstly a case study of a specific area-based initiative - the Leith Project, Edinburgh will be provided and secondly the structure of the approach used to evaluate the success of the project. A summary of the conclusions of the project evaluation will conclude this insight.

### 2. The Leith project - Edinburgh

Leith is an area of Edinburgh and the port for the city. It was formerly a separate administrative area. The Leith Project had its origins in a Working Party formed in 1979. The Working Party comprised representatives of the SDA, the City and Regional Councils.

In 1979, the Working Party reported that Leith faced serious problems of unemployment, employment decline, poor physical environment, dereliction, substandard housing and inadequate supply of industrial land. To address these problems the report stated that additional resources would be required from all levels of government, public agencies and the European Community. It recommended that the problems be tackled through a special integrated project in the area.

The report also drew attention to the paucity of relevant economic information on the Leith Area. Economic and environmental studies were proposed in advance of the creation of the special integrated project.

Prior to the studies an 'Early Action Programme' was promoted comprising:

- \* Construction of small industrial units;
- \* Treatment of derelict/vacant sites;
- \* Stone cleaning of buildings;
- \* Feasibility studies re-use of particular vacant buildings; and
- \* SDA assistance to a factory relocation.