

## Article:

# Place: The Promised Land



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**George Eckton, Partnership Director at South East of Scotland Transport Partnership reflects on the role of infrastructure in placemaking.**

I've been asked to discuss infrastructure and place, placemaking and planning. The task led me to a 1953 quote and essay by Ivan Chtcheglov, (probably saying more about me than the task given), "*Formulary for a New Urbanism*." Chtcheglov wrote that: to get these things right is a vision of physical, social and environmental success - and so described "*the hacienda [that] must be built*". The current City Devolution agenda is a key opportunity to reach such a promised land in Scotland. However, as I'll later argue, it won't come about by the people from the grand house on the hill telling the communities below what they need...

The status quo prescription for urban places has generally been a series of treatments, mainly engineering ones, targeted at "*making places better*" – a grand plan or project that will deliver journey time benefits, or a masterplan that shows how an architect thinks their vision of place will benefit inner city communities. Another situationist, Guy Debord, who was in 1950's Paris with Chtcheglov, argued that infrastructure was solely commercially focussed and largely ignored the importance of culture and play for users. There's a parallel here with our current experience, and the planning review proposal to align land-use and community planning provides an opportunity to avoid ever seeing commerce and community as two paths that never met.

The Royal Society of Arts Inclusive Growth Commission has said that we need to move the place agenda away from the traditional medicine of "*build it and they will come*", in order to focus on social and environmental infrastructure. I agree; we should be asking communities "*can you feel it*" and, "*have you got the love*" for improvements to your place and its infrastructure. We (professionals) might deliver projects and believe that improvements have been achieved in a macro-economic sense, but what was the community's perception? This means going beyond physical improvements, and enabling people who are near major improvements to feel a sense of ownership and benefit.

Transport planners need to reclaim their own place in this agenda. Places must have the transport services and accessibility that communities need. Connectivity is a buzz word at present but ultimately, if we want better places, we need people to access and use them. We can't make places better without infrastructure, including services. Transport is a derived demand; you rarely do it for the sake of it, other than in a tourist sense. However, it is an essential preventative measure against economically inactive places becoming further excluded, whether through walking, cycling, bus, road or rail improvements.

**So, how to deliver this vision of infrastructure as a social and environmental benefit as much as an economic one?**

Every city in Scotland has agreed or is negotiating a City Region Deal. This is an excellent opportunity to follow up on the suggestions of the RSA report in enabling a focus on the elusive business of prevention and early intervention. The City Region Deals could focus on genuinely inclusive place-based strategies, tailored to the needs, ambitions and nuances of places' economic geography. They are an opportunity to take into account safety, accessibility and inequality (in the UK, we know that women are more likely than men to need public transport to balance work and caring responsibilities). The issue of intersectionality across groups impacts on other people's accessibility and mobility, and will also be fundamental to driving inclusion in future places. We need to be talking about childcare and social care facilities in the same breath as infrastructure at the scale of the Queensferry Crossing, if we are serious about inclusive growth and inclusive places. This means asking communities if they relate to the vision prescribed by planners, or if they have better medicine for their place.

It's my view that we do still have the culture of telling people what's good for them, instead of asking them what would improve their place. We need to ask how planning



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can get involved with them, rather than them getting involved in planning. A play on words, maybe, but this would represent a real change in culture –one that, through their recent Position Statement – it seems the Scottish Ministers want to deliver.

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**“We need to be talking about childcare and social care facilities in the same breath as infrastructure of the scale of the Queensferry Crossing if we want inclusive growth and inclusive places”**

In this respect it's been good to see the emergence of the Place Standard tool. We need to know where love for places lives and who it comes from, better balancing the need for grand designs and community desires, as they are both ingredients of success in the prevention, treatment and cure of any place's ills.

South East of Scotland Transport Partnership's positive experience with the Young Scot X-Route study over the past year is another example of the benefits of involving communities in decision making. The X-Route project delivered four Exploration Workshops with up to 12 young people of various ages, socio-economic backgrounds, and local

authority areas in South East Scotland. The individuals also had varying degrees of understanding, experience and interest in active travel. These groups were supported to create a visualisation of the issues they face with active travel. The ideas from the young people, including a “*glow in the dark*” cycle path, have led to innovation which may be used on trunk roads, while also bringing a ‘fun’ dimension to infrastructure and showing that it need not always be so commercially focussed.

The co-design approach didn't just improve the infrastructure. Crucially, it offered benefits to the people involved. X-Route is, for me, a great example of co-production which implements the initial participatory recommendations of the independent Planning Review and leads to better places. Co-designing is one way of preparing plans and proposals with communities of place or interest that can generate greater active involvement in the planning process.

Targeted during the X-Route Project, young people have a significant role to play in encouraging organisations and communities to adopt a more collaborative culture, focusing resources to effectively meet the needs of individuals and communities.

Young Scot's co-design service involves young people systematically co-creating, co-producing, co-designing and co-delivering solutions, in collaboration with organisations. Young people are involved much earlier in the decision making process through this highly participative approach, developing informed insights, ideas, recommendations and solutions for service development, policy and practice.

**It's welcoming to see such a process nominated at the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning and People's Choice Awards.**

The introduction of the Equality Act's socio-economic duty is expected to place a legal duty on planners to make places more equitable, with LDPs in particular identified. The duty could be a mechanism to readdress current place and decision-making concerns, linking community and land-use planning systems, given how vital and inclusive place-based solutions are to communities and to long term useable infrastructure.

As George Harrison once summarised Lewis Carroll: “If you don't know where you're going any road will take you there”. That's not an argument not to plan, for place or for transport; rather, it is a position of not knowing the answer before you've asked all communities what infrastructure and place they want to be planned and created. ■