An Urban Manifesto for UK Cities

Transformation towards sustainable and resilient communities

Regenerating the UK’s post-industrial cities

An Urban Manifesto in ten recommendations by Steffen Lehmann
Introduction

Strategies for an Urban Regeneration of UK Cities

Cities worldwide are facing huge challenges and answer partially lies in closer collaboration between city leaders, industry, community and universities. A paradigm shift in urban thinking is now happening in the UK, where cities become urban laboratories, highlighting participatory planning processes and new ways of greening cities, to build inclusive public space.

Urbanisation is one of the defining processes of contemporary times, and our understanding of the urban, whether in theory or in practice, has reached a turning point: cities in the UK and across the world are facing new complex and challenging conditions that require resilience and adaptation to the impacts of environmental and social change. It’s time to rethink and regenerate cities for the age of global warming.

In 2016-2017, we co-ordinated three meetings inviting around 120 participants and decision makers (including members from industry, community, academia and local government) to co-develop a better understanding of the drivers of UK cities and to develop ideas for an urban manifesto for the transformation of UK cities. The outcome is presented in this publication. Using public dialogue and debate to discuss visionary but grounded ideas for the future of cities in the UK, we explored their continuing transformation to service and knowledge-based cities (it’s critical to explain the reasons for change and educate the public in good urban design). This requires politicians that look beyond short election cycles, developers with a genuine interest in creating high quality and journalists with the expertise to report on urban transformation beyond ‘spectacular headlines’.

The need was recognised to produce a statement of urban principles, which focuses on the characteristics of a ‘good place’ and the strategies of sustainable urbanism. It was also recognised that stimulating an urban regeneration will depend on an agreed and ambitious urban vision that attracts the investment required for such large-scale urban transformations. The urban future of UK cities requires us to work closely together and support local leadership to develop better strategies, policies, tools and projects that will help to address and resolve some of the core challenges of cities.

Today, urbanisation and urban regeneration are seen as the 21st-century’s most transformative trend. But we must also be aware of the limitations of urban design and be careful not to burden future generations with inefficient concepts or solutions that are not inclusive. The UN’s New Urban Agenda has set a high benchmark with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the type of urban development we should strive for, as well as a clear accountability framework for achieving it. The motto ‘leave no one behind’ is a challenge that should be applied to every district and neighbourhood.

The aim must be to stop the decline of the inner-cities, deliver the millions of new homes needed and develop the existing city in a way that makes it more resilient, liveable and sustainable. This process is about regenerating the existing city, not reinventing what the city might be.

United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals; Goal 11 is on Sustainable Cities and Communities (UN, 2015)
Most of the time, UK cities do not need spectacular change or short-term vanity projects, but instead more modest careful step-by-step regeneration strategies that get the best out of what we already have. This is not anti-‘big buildings’ but advocating a diversity of uses, scales and spaces.

To achieve all this, our collaborative networks and partnerships are crucial, including closer collaboration between all levels of government, communities, the private sector and academia, to enable interconnected peer-to-peer learning networks and better information and knowledge sharing. Architects are slowly regaining their interest in urbanism and strategic thinking about future neighbourhoods and what the city should look and feel like.

The issue of urban sustainability is of such multi- and trans-disciplinary nature that the development of any meaningful research and innovation agenda must be a co-created effort of all society. Architects, planners, urban designers, geographers and engineers have a crucial role to play in developing strategies and adaptation solutions to ensure our cities are resilient, resource-efficient and sustainable in the face of intensifying global warming.

UK society is becoming more diverse, complex and mobile. Urban dwellers expect more housing choice. Behaviour change is now seen as relevant to strengthen sustainable consumption and address issues such as waste management and travel behaviour. More and more activities are moved from the private realm into public space. The link between social problems in urban areas and urban health and well-being needs to be better understood. So the trend in UK cities for public space to become commercialised and privatised is a dangerous one.

Most urban policies in the UK are now over 15 years old, meaning that they have been formulated pre-climate change impact awareness and are often ill-informed. There is now a need to update policies on new, integrated and evidence-based urban understanding. However, the best approach to the sustainable transformation of UK communities and its enabling factors are still unclear and have been for a long time an under-researched area.

Each city has an underlying unique structural logic. The performance and efficiency of a city depends on a range of criteria, but is largely influenced by its structural lay-out, density, block sizes and transportation systems.

It is obvious that the best scale (unit) of intervention is the neighbourhood and its infrastructural system (this is a group of buildings, less at the single building scale), to have an impact, make a difference and collect and analyse new data that could guide future decision-making on urban development. The city is always more than just a series of individual acts of architecture; it’s about a combined effort to contribute to the continuous transformation of the urban fabric.

The attention is also turning to the UK’s regional cities. Manchester’s current revival has a flourishing grassroots urban farming movement, Bradford has a growing arts scene. Brighton is creating new places that bring socio-economic benefits, Hull is the UK City of Culture and Bristol

“Architects ability to shape the city and engage with public attitudes has been eroded. At a point when we need most planning we have the least.”

– David Chipperfield
experiences an urban regeneration driven by innovative start-ups. But these activities all depend on affordable living costs and the availability of low cost space for studios - something London has lost a long time ago.

Influential thinkers on urban regeneration – from Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford, Kevin Lynch to Patrick Geddes, Colin Rowe, Peter Hall and Jan Gehl – have contributed their theories and thinking to guide our understanding of ‘good place’. Almost 20 years ago, the Urban Task Force and Richard Rogers published the seminal manifesto for UK cities entitled ‘Towards an Urban Renaissance’ (1999). Many of the ideas from this time are still relevant today. Their manifesto established a vision for cities in the UK founded on the principles of social well-being, environmental responsibility and design-excellence.

20 years later, we present 10 principles of urban regeneration that we think will make a positive difference. But these principles cannot be tackled in an isolated way; they need to be tackled simultaneously. This urban manifesto is a homage to our beautiful cities and the need to continually re-frame the questions of our urban future.

Cities are never finished objects, but always in transformation. This pamphlet introduces ten optimistic high-level guiding strategies as principles of good urbanism that we hope might guide the urban regeneration of our post-industrial cities.

Their implementation is critical. We are launching this urban manifesto to assert the following principles for a confident urban future.

To this aim, the Cluster for Sustainable Cities collaborates with the business community and local government to reshape UK cities to become more dynamic, innovative and lively while embracing opportunity and continuing to reinvent themselves as highly liveable and resilient places. We have teamed up with advocates of the new culture of urbanism to crystallize what it means for UK cities to regenerate. We can now carefully consider what action we will take together to regenerate our cities to be healthy and liveable.

Please join us on this journey.

Professor Steffen Lehmann
Cluster for Sustainable Cities
University of Portsmouth

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Ten Strategies for an Urban Regeneration

Why an Urban Manifesto for UK cities?
Successful urban regeneration will be the result of a collective vision, realised through creative and enduring relationships between the community, government, university, developers and professionals involved in its design, delivery, governance and maintenance.

Today, strategic thinking about our cities, what they should look like and how they should perform, is more important than ever.

The following strategies for urban regeneration of UK cities are recommended:

Strategy 1.
Urban culture and heritage – maintaining a unique sense of place

Strategy 2.
A public space network for a compact, walkable and mixed-use city

Strategy 3.
Mobility – moving around cities conveniently

Strategy 4.
Coastal cities: transforming the waterfronts of resilient, future-proof cities

Strategy 5.
Inclusive mixed-used urban living

Strategy 6.
High-quality architectural design as a catalyst for a better city

Strategy 7.
Smart citizens, smart energy and citizen participation

Strategy 8.
Thinking long-term and making the most of what we have

Strategy 9.
Developing vibrant university quarters as the regenerated heart of our cities

Strategy 10.
Cities sharing their experiences, learning from each other: new knowledge platforms
Strategy 1.

Urban culture and heritage – maintaining a unique sense of place

Maintaining the fine grain of the city and the urban fabric: the continuous transformation of a city should be linked to its past and sense of place, as a shared and refined urban vision. The cultures of the people and ecology of the place must be expressed at a human scale through both physical and social structures.

Coherence, not spectacle: Looking to the past for context is vital to the design of successful public spaces. The distinctive cultural identity, diversity and full potential of the community should be supported spiritually, physically and visually to sustain a sense of collective ownership, belonging and civic pride.

The design of spaces and buildings is always influenced by their context enhancing local character and heritage. Simultaneously responding to current-day needs, changes in society and cultural diversity, contemporary places can have a deep sense of the city’s history and heritage. Architecture can be transformative in its localities without sparking gentrification.

Increasing biodiversity within the city: natural areas and parks must be easily accessible and in close proximity to citizens. Developing community and neighbourhood resilience is a pathway to resilience of the whole city.

Responding to demographic change, the significance of ‘place’ and social diversity needs more attention.

Green spaces, community gardens and urban farming can play a huge role in delivering ecological and social functions within cities. Preserving green space and re-naturing strategies are important factors for any city (with benefits ranging from reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution to reduction in obesity).
Strategy 2.

A public space network for a compact, walkable and mixed-use city

Creating calm, walkable streetscapes and connected public spaces is the ‘glue’ needed to hold the different parts of the city centre together.

Vibrant streets and urban spaces with their own distinct character should form a coherent interconnected network of places that support walking, social interaction and display distinctive private, commercial and civil functions.

Streets designed for pedestrians: the pedestrian environment should be closely associated with active frontages at street level so there can be an appropriate intensity of use at all times.

Nature-sensitive urban strategies and a greener city will help to increase biodiversity, absorb CO₂ emissions and improve public health and well-being; this includes the use of sustainable drainage systems and permeable ground surfaces across the city.

Essential activities must be accessible or within walking distance and there should be a concentration of activity around meeting places. This could include growing food locally.

Create policy and incentives to make urban forests, green roofs, community gardens and food production a part of the city’s future.

The public realm must be age-friendly and supported by inclusive processes that respond to the local community and its changing economic and social conditions.

Delivering new types of infrastructure and public spaces: the continuous upgrading of public space to provide opportunities to ensure connectivity and social inclusion are strong themes throughout the urban future.

“The presence of buildings around a park is important in design. They enclose it. They make a definite shape out of the space.”

– Jane Jacobs
Strategy 3.

Mobility – moving around cities conveniently

We need to walk more and drive less, for our own health and the health of the ecosystem, so better walking routes within the city are essential. Cycling highways will make it possible to cycle entirely separate from cars and trucks.

Healthy ageing in the city: a permeable street network with pedestrian priority gives maximum freedom of movement, making walking and cycling enjoyable and safe while offering a good choice of active transport.

Electric mobility will significantly reduce air pollution and noise in the city. Could we ban combustion engine cars in our city centres by 2030?

Public spaces are the ‘glue’ that holds society together. Mobility is the ‘oil’ that brings people together. Strengthening the connectivity and removing walls and fences will play an important part in enhancing the city’s connectivity and resilience.

Make transportation more equitable and identify new region-wide mobility concepts that are not car-based. For instance, enable young adults to travel freely by public transport will open up opportunities for education and jobs.

Cities must have fewer cars on their roads to ease congestion, reduce air pollution and noise by using alternative forms of transport including public transport, in the form of buses and light railway, on-demand minibus services, car-sharing schemes, e-bikes, cycling and walking.

“Adding highway lanes to deal with traffic congestion is like loosening your belt to cure obesity.”

– Lewis Mumford
Strategy 4.
Coastal Cities: transforming the waterfronts of resilient, future-proof cities

“A city is more than a place in space, its is a drama in time.”
– Patrick Geddes

Although completely ‘future-proofing’ a city is impossible, we can strategically plan ahead and allow the city to become more adaptable and anticipate demands and impacts to ensure future infrastructure is resilient.

New and existing public places must respect, enhance and respond to their local natural environment within and around them.

Increasing community participation in the planning process: decision-making for the ongoing development and management of the future waterfront and urban fabric must engage stakeholders and the local community through public participation.

Strengthening the city’s readiness to deal with the impact of sea-level rise: alongside protecting from the dangers of sea-level rise, urban parks and other landscaped areas along the waterfront should provide space for recreation, increase biodiversity and help support a balanced environment.

Enhancing the seafront with a boardwalk, soft landscaping and dykes (such as in the Netherlands where sea-level rise challenges are resolved by clever landscaping design) are usually a better solution than hard-engineered seawalls.
Strategy 5.
Inclusive mixed-used urban living

We cannot allow cities to sprawl in an uncoordinated way or expanding in greenfield sites. There are over 60,000 hectares of brownfield land in UK cities which already have strong transport links to trains and trams. We need to engage more in infill development in already built-up areas before encroaching into green belts or greenfield sites. Building more suburbs would lead to increased car use and the risk of emptying out existing cities.

Cities that manage density well will enrich the lives of people who live and work there. Urban form and good building design are also significant drivers of resource efficiency and neighbourhood regeneration.

The city must provide a diversity of functions, tenure, facilities and services, have a mix of building designs and types and include a variety of appropriately scaled neighbourhoods catering to different socio-economic groups and encouraging a better use of roof spaces.

A diverse, accessible, affordable and active city will encourage successful commercial activity, promote prosperity and support the well-being of inhabitants including the ageing population.

Architects can help prevent gentrification through well-balanced residential/non-residential mixed-use developments that reduce travel and support inclusion.

The built environment must seek to minimise the use of carbon-intensive products, energy and non-renewable resources. Modular houses that are built off-site are a way to extend housing choices and open up innovative models for urban infill and careful densification.

Modular off-site manufactured housing can deliver houses faster and to a higher quality and reduce construction waste. The supply of good housing is essential for growth, including a decent standard of multi-generational family housing.

“What is the city but the people?”
– William Shakespeare
Strategy 6.

High-quality architectural design as a catalyst for a better city

Architecture has to be more than individual acts: it has to provide a coherent background. You cannot create a city from ‘iconic’ foreground buildings, otherwise you will get a circus of attention-seeking self-referential buildings (like Dubai for instance).

Architecture is a continuously developing and public language, and design must be at the heart of any urban planning, creating a human-scale built environment, higher design standards and raising the overall quality of our architectural culture.

The best way to achieve the shift to carbon-neutral buildings and higher quality architectural design is through design contest - where a solution is sought from a well-defined and agreed brief.

We should use the development of publicly-owned land to pioneer the best sustainable designs and be effective champions of the importance of good architecture. Leading by example: the city council and the university can collaborate as transformation agents, supporting design culture.

Encouraging the reuse and up-cycling of existing buildings and structures and the careful increase in urban density will help to make the city more authentic and sustainable, which can include mixed-use neighbourhoods such as apartments on top of shopping malls, enabling people to live in or close to the city centre.

Sustainable cities are compact, intensive and diverse. The use of local materials can give a place its homogeneity and distinctive character.

Infill through careful densification, setting high design standards with a coherence in building heights and the use of materials and colour — with a plurality of aesthetic approaches being offered.

“Architecture is about public space held by buildings.”

– Richard Rogers
Strategy 7.
Smart citizens, smart energy and citizen participation

Everyone has a right to the city. Strengthening public participation in decision making and creating inclusive public spaces is an important goal. Smart, citizen-centric planning will use urban performance data for better informed decision-making and new policy formulation.

This includes an accelerated transition to clean, renewable energy generated in the city, and the integration of emerging technologies. Digital urbanism can be used to model and forecast the impacts of decisions on urban living.

To activate the water-energy-food nexus, new green infrastructure and nature-based solutions are required that include sustainable drainage systems, smart electricity grids and concepts based on the principles of a circular economy.

Measuring urban sustainability progress is essential to be sure we are on the right trajectory.

The smart city approach: working more closely with universities will allow cities to make the most out of digitisation (ranging from intelligent traffic systems, to data harvesting, car-sharing on demand, to drone mapping, to virtual reality for neighbourhood regeneration and scenario testing).

Data collection and analysis technology is a key enabler of solutions that will make cities more sustainable and responsive.

“The word citizen has to do with cities, and the ideal city is organised around citizenship - around participation in public life.”

– Rebecca Solnit
Strategy 8.
Thinking long-term and making the most of what we have

Optimising urban density and exploring alternative density scenarios will enhance the city. Too much low density development is leading to too many car trips and inefficiencies. Some new thinking about compact, higher density living around transport hubs and above shopping centres is necessary.

The contradictory objectives need to be carefully balanced: How people want to live versus the imperatives of sustainability targets.

Gaining community trust and buy-in in higher density is the first step, as we cannot do density without community support. Land value is critical. How can we better capture the increase in land value from public investment?

Great street, great place, great neighbourhood: In urban regeneration long-term thinking is essential. Too much focus on the short run does not contribute to solving social disparities.

Taking full advantage of the existing and making the most of what we have, while creating ‘Spaces of Opportunity’ is a sustainable way to strengthen the city and repair the discontinuities.

Undoubtedly, the greatest asset of cities are the existing buildings, the old and new, and the combination of history and density. The adaptive reuse of historical buildings in combination with contemporary extensions provides a good model.

“Density and mixed-use creates urbanity.”
– Renzo Piano
Strategy 9.

Developing vibrant university quarters at the regenerated heart of our cities

Re-Imagine a regenerated city centre that is less car dominated, with walkable public space and a world class university quarter at its centre.

Fit for the future: creating a campus that has a long life, loose fit approach and strong pedestrian connectivity with public spaces that provide moments of calm in the city centre.

New urban forms should be capable of adaptation over time to meet changing needs and to promote the continued use of existing buildings and resources.

The new university quarters will be integrated into their surrounding community, with transparent ground-floors that allow for greater permeability and visibility of activities and the integration of public uses, with new informal spaces between buildings for interaction and learning.

Universities should develop ‘Innovation Quarters’ and reduce car-centric situations by increasing the provision of secure cycle racks and further promote bicycle usage and cycling by staff and students.

“Great streets make great cities.”

- Jane Jacobs
Strategy 10.

Cities sharing their experiences, learning from each other: new knowledge platforms

The role of social innovation, collaboration and entrepreneurship in cities has to be recognised. There has to be space provided for alternative economies to thrive, which will benefit all.

Addressing the challenges of climate change through better urban development: compact well-connected cities are more walkable, allowing for active zero-emission mobility such as walking, cycling and e-bikes.

Participatory and people-centred urban governance: people-centred planning will further improve the liveability and competitiveness of our cities by encouraging practices that make them more just, safe, healthy and resilient. Concepts of co-creation, empowerment and community engagement play a significant role in the regeneration of our cities.

To change policy at the urban level and increase capacity: we can create a network of cities with new knowledge platforms that support better decision making, allow cities to learn from each other and enhance impact.

We need more research with a strong focus on improving the environmental performance of neighbourhoods and communities, by introducing the concept of ‘integrated urban climate resilience’. The integration of technologies can further optimise the resource-efficient city, including end-user driven system integration (including different age and user groups).

“By far the greatest and most admirable form of wisdom is that needed to plan and beautify cities and human communities.”

– Socrates
Steffen Lehmann

Professor Steffen Lehmann, PhD AA Dip, is a leading researcher in the field of sustainable urbanism. He has an international reputation and has made substantial contributions to the multi-disciplinary research field, leading a research group on sustainable cities. He is Professor of Sustainable Architecture and Founding Director of the interdisciplinary Cluster for Sustainable Cities at the University of Portsmouth (UK). The cluster is a research group of 38 active researchers from a wide range of disciplines.

Steffen has more than 25 years of experience in sustainable urban development. Prior to his appointment in the UK, he was a tenured Chair and full Professor for 13 years in Australia (2003 to 2015), where he held a number of senior leadership positions, ranging from Head of School of Built Environment to Director of two flagship Research Centres on Sustainable Design at the University of South Australia. During this time he has had significant responsibility for creating and leading new urban research formations. He has exploited these opportunities with distinction generating a large publication and granting output and a continuous stream of successful research students.

He supervises post-doctoral and PhD researchers, has led the implementation of the strategic renewal of the research and teaching areas of a large School and established university-wide research centres. In the 1990s, with his own practice, Steffen was actively involved in the architectural creation of the `New Berlin'. He has been a invited as Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkeley, TU-Berlin and National University of Singapore, a DAAD-Professor at the TU-Munich, and UNESCO Chair in Sustainable Urban Development (2008-10). He is a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Institute of Australian Architects and Academy of Urbanism. He was invited as keynote speaker at over 50 important international conferences in 39 countries.

Steffen is a prolific publisher and has published 17 authored, edited or co-edited books, numerous book chapters, articles and papers (150+), 5 journal special issues, entries to encyclopedias, co-authored parts of important UN reports and presented at more than 450 conferences.


His research interests are in the following intertwined areas:

- Resilient urbanisation for low carbon compact cities
- Green urbanism theory - scenarios for the City of the Future
- Resource-efficient construction: infill using modular off-site manufacturing
- Urban culture and new programs for age-friendly public space
- Sustainable architecture, smart high-performance buildings and technology integration
- History & theory of cities, urban renewal and cultural heritage

Recent book publications

The fruits of Steffen’s research are prodigious, including scholarly books (authored and edited), articles and conference papers, invited book chapters, online podcasts and contributions to significant industry and policy reports. Here are some of his recently published books:
A pamphlet of urban principles for the regeneration of UK cities that focuses on the characteristics of a “good place” and the strategies of sustainable urbanism.

www.city-futures.org.uk