

FOCUS ON GLOBAL ISSUES

Real Estate Deals With a World in Transition

BY NICHOLAS BROOKE, FRICS



WHEN DEFINING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL CITY the term Sustainability or, in the more narrower context, Sustainable Development is usually high on the list of requirements, representing if you like the stamp of approval that National Governments, city authorities, plan makers and project promoters seek to attach to their various initiatives to demonstrate a caring and responsible attitude. But like smart buildings, or innovative design, the phrase Sustainable Development will mean different things to different people and have as many interpretations as there are persons in the audience. Not least whilst there is physical sustainability, there also is the sustainability associated with the test of time and changes in lifestyle, fashion, and aspirations. Important, too, is financial sustainability. Other than the case of initiatives undertaken for social reasons or in the interests of the community at large, projects have to be economically viable and sustainable.

Governments, advisory and professional bodies and those from the sustainability movement have gone to great lengths to devise a range of benchmarks against which to check and measure the sustainability of policies and projects. However, all these assessments and judgments are of necessity made in the context of conditions and circumstances today and wearing 2004 spectacles. I have to say that this is becoming of increasing concern.

We design and plan for future generations but the question has to be asked do we really know how our children will see things and what will be their priorities. Indeed you might ask what right have we to impose on future generations, solutions which may be appropriate today but irrel-

evant or worse still a burden in 30 or 40 years time. We have seen far reaching changes in technology, communications and in business delivery and in the priorities now placed on lifestyle, leisure and the quality of life. This provokes concerns as to whether we should be trying to anticipate the nature of the changes that will take place over the next 50 or even 100 years.

We design buildings with a life of over 50 years, we design roads and infrastructure to last even longer and we plan with a degree of permanency which it could be argued on occasions verges on the arrogant. That permanency also comes at a significant cost either to the community, the tax payer or the project promoter.

The question has to be why? Basic standards to meet safety and other similar considerations are, of course, essential and not the issue. But is there not another definition or version of sustainability that involves creating projects where flexibility and the scope to adapt and to change are the main driving and motivating forces. In the extreme, should we perhaps not be designing for obsolescence? This would involve a very different mind-set to that which largely currently prevails, but how are we to know in reality, how buildings will be used in 20 or 30 years time and indeed whether they will be in the right location in the future. Similarly, modes of transportation could change dramatically as could the relationship between home and the workplace and we should not forget the ongoing impact that technology is going to have on how we live, work and play.

Given the nature of these changes which cannot be accurately anticipated at this stage, should we not at least be

stepping back as an industry and questioning where the concept of Sustainable Development may be driving us. At minimum should not flexibility of use, purpose and design be one of the principal criteria and should we not be studying more closely construction technologies which will enable us to dismantle and re-assemble even the largest of buildings and also sustainable methods of construction which do enable and indeed facilitate a decision that the project has been overtaken by time, is obsolete/redundant and can be demolished without recrimination about monies spent, having been wasted.

There is a growing school of thought that it is wrong for us to seek to impose solutions on future generations, which I sense we are doing under the banner of sustainable development in that many of the tests centre around the life and duration of the project. There seems to be a view, driven often by the size of the investment involved, that permanency measured in terms of the life of the project is the key objective. But what if we started from the opposite direction and said that flexibility rather than permanence was the prime goal and that we don't necessarily want or need to design with a 50 or 100 year life in mind? Might we not find that we achieve a rather more innova-

tive and less expensive solution? What if a design competition brief was so worded that the assignment was to be awarded to the team who produced the most flexible design from an occupational and user perspective and one which allowed either the building to be dismantled and moved elsewhere or re-assembled on site but to a different configuration? Perhaps a special bonus could go to the team which enabled a decision as to obsolescence to be taken after 10, 15 or even 20 years without financial penalty to the project promoters.

Very different thinking, I know. But it does trouble me as I look at the major investment currently being ploughed into buildings and infrastructure in many of our major cities. Will future generations will be cursing rather than praising us for our inflexibility and our assumption that we know what is right for them? ■

About our Featured Columnist

Nicholas Brooke, JP, BBS, FRICS, FHKIS, RPS, is the global president of RICS (the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors).