

FOREWORD

Place-shaping in a new era of civic accountability

'We're all in it together, says Prime Minister Cameron. The only problem is that some of us may never be able to get out, quipped one wag on a recent radio panel show. Sad to say, he might well be right. Although we are entering a phase where government, professionals, practitioners, community activists and policymakers all claim to be on the same page when it comes to creating places that work for people, the ongoing spectre of weak economies and struggling currencies still haunts millions of people around the world who are living in environments that see little prospect of regeneration any time soon.

We may well say that people are no longer mere consumers of urban space, but are now participants in placemaking, but will the proposed extension of participation reach past the demands of ROI, past the challenges of partnership working, and connect with those who yearn for change – and who have creative ideas about how to drive place-based innovation, given the right kind of support and resource.

The coalition government has demonstrated its commitment to raise the status and significance of community-led responsibility, as it asks both professionals and the public to step forward and fill the gap left by a retreating state. But do we really have the the necessary mindset and the tools, skills and experience to do the job? How will professionals and activists involved in the making of better places rise to this fundamental challenge?

Participation, consultation and involvement have been concepts espoused in the planning and neighbourhood management fields for many years. But have they been seriously embraced by professionals and political leaders – and will they be this time around? Critics say they that engagement practices are often used as a fig leaf to support decisions made within traditional establishment and organisational structures. How do we change this suspicion?

PLACEmaking 2010/11 explores best practice in local and regional placemaking involvement, participation and empowerment, discusses the solutions to 'consultation fatigue' and considers new models for expressing and acting upon the views and motivations of local communities – passing genuine power down the line.

The creation of better places goes way beyond planning and design. It relates to selecting our options for living, working, shopping, getting around, meeting up and relaxing. It is rooted in control and empowerment. Place matters. And it will be through supporting community involvement in the development of places that the 'big society' will take shape, enabling communities to design, invest in and manage their own places.

A new era of people-led place shaping will impact on design, delivery and democracy across neighbourhoods, towns and cities. The issues are complex: working towards place-based budgeting, investing in skills development, enabling access to evidence bases, information and tools, and supporting social inclusion.

We will need new practical and professional skillsets, innovative land ownership, development and funding models, improved networks for knowledge-sharing, and effective methods of measuring and evaluating success – and of learning from mistakes and failures. We also need genuine partnerships between local authorities and grassroots activists, and the willingness to put real power in new places.

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