

An aerial photograph of a city grid, showing a dense pattern of streets and buildings. The grid is centered in the image, with a prominent horizontal street cutting across the middle. The overall tone is grayscale, with varying shades of gray representing different building heights and street widths.

Internacional Conference

# 20th CENTURY NEW TOWNS

**ARCHETYPES AND UNCERTAINTIES**

Porto, ESAP Auditorium, 22-24 May 2014



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Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo

# **20th CENTURY NEW TOWNS**

## **Archetypes and Uncertainties**

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Conference proceedings

Edited by  
Paolo Marcolin and Joaquim Flores

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## **UNCERTAINTY IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN PLANNING CONCEPTS AND METHODS**

### **What we (still) can learn from Garden Cities and New Towns.**

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#### **Abstract**

*Uncertainty is a keyword of the 20th century urban history. Wars, depressions, crisis and social and technological advancements have showed us how deep the changes in economic, political and social systems were responsible for the emergence of urban planning and management practices and how their uncertainties became deep embedded within them.*

*Uncertainty grew with the increased tendency for fragmented systems – of spaces, society and information, which compose our contemporary "third cities" (Borja 2003) – and with the increased mobility of goods, information and people (Ascher 2010) as conflicts and incompatibilities arose. Several authors created new names for these relational systems in an effort to think beyond the canonical city – Gottmann's Megalopolis, Hall's Disappearing City, Garreau's Edge City, Corboz's Ippercità, Koolhaas' Generic City, Ascher's Metapolis, Sieverts' Zwischenstadt and Indovina's Diffuse City, among others. Concepts and methods are thus being questioned as they do not efficiently respond to these territories' needs: the notion of limits (morphological, administrative, symbolic, disciplinary), the efficacy of formal planning, the hierarchical and linear planning systems, to name a few.*

*Yet, these concepts still inform planning and urban management practices, making them unresponsive to the uncertainties and opportunities of our contemporary territories. As a response, other concepts are emerging – informality, flexibility, networking, hybrid and intermediary systems – as a better basis for a strategic, incremental and heuristic "new urbanism" (Ascher 1991).*

*This paper is part of a preliminary PhD research on the flexibility of the instruments of territorial management and their efficacy on regulating the contemporary urban space, and will focus on the uncertainties present on the post-war New Towns experiences and on the influential Garden City movement, and on what contemporary urban planning – as a process still incomplete and open to different interpretations and appropriation processes – can learn from them.*

**Keywords:** New Town, Garden City, contemporary planning, uncertainty, flexibility.

## **Introduction: of archetypes and uncertainties**

Archetype and uncertainty are concepts that lead us to an apparent paradox: on the one hand, archetype indicates a collective elaboration and reproduction of a timeless and persistent "state of affairs"<sup>1</sup>; the latter brings us to an unstable and transitory state.

The theoretical model of Garden City, proposed by Howard in the late nineteenth century, and its application in Letchworth, Welwyn and in the post-war New Towns program in Britain, are privileged case studies to reflect on this apparent paradox and, especially, in its persistence and relevance to contemporary urban planning.

Archetypes are collective images belonging to humanity itself, contents of a collective unconscious, and universal images crafted by the repetition and sedimentation of typical images – therefore, pure formal elements with no content whatsoever (Jung 1976/2002).

It's recognized in contemporary urban planning theory the persistence of an archetype of the city associated with a typical image: a city of oppositions between itself and the country, between concentration and dispersion, and of pre-conceptions regarding the country and the dispersive territories urbanity.

This archetype has thus been compromised in the face of a growing uncertainty on what makes a city today, as many authors are creating new names and models for these types of non-traditional-cities, such as Koolhaas "Generic City" (Koolhaas, Mau, Sigler, & Werlemann, 1995/1998) or, simply, the death of the city and the emergence of the urban (Choay 1994/1999).

In this article we will explore these oppositions, through archetypes and uncertainties, applying them to the post-war New Towns program in Britain but also to what contemporary urban planning – as a still open and incomplete process – can learn from them.

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<sup>1</sup> Borrowing an expression from Fernando Gil (Gil 2000, p. 174).

We will first address the opposition city / country and its relation with Howard's Garden City movement, and the sense of that opposition in the contemporary territory; then we will focus on another opposition – concentration / dispersion – looking for its relation with the city and the country, its role on the emergence of the Garden City movement, the (also) sense of that opposition today and its relation with a so-called sense of urbanity; finally, we will describe some practical applications of the New Towns program, their results and uncertainties, trying to understand, on the one hand, if it's possible to fit them into a single model coming from the principles of Garden City movement or if, on the other hand, such singular model does not exist and the New Towns program promoted different results and expressions.

### **Between city and country's urbanity**

The opposition and complementarity between city and country has promoted timeless and cross-disciplinary debates in urban planning.

It remains in the collective imaginary an archetype of the city that no longer corresponds to the reality, a position based on several misconceptions – such as trying to read the territory as an opposition between city and country, two large containers where we still try to fit all the diverse expressions of the contemporary territory. These two objects of opposition once shared the clarity of being distinct and were adequate to reading reality.

Even though, through history, the city has been built as an opposition to the country, both having different (though somewhat related) economic logics (Busquets 1995, p. 13), the relations between city and country were far from the stability of the archetypes, assuming, throughout the time and the evolution of production methods and patterns, sometimes conflictive, sometimes complementary expressions (Lefebvre 1968/1991).

The Middle Ages expressed this complementary relationship as well as an economic and social interdependence between city and country (Mumford 1961/1966) which would be later compromised by the deep social, economic,

cultural and technological advancements brought by the Industrial Revolution, which created a new reality that was neither city or country, and best known, generically, by urban (Choay 1994/1999, p. 70).

The archetypes of city and country have thus been placed in question by the uncertainty in defining this new reality, identified by several authors from different areas of knowledge involved in an increasingly multidisciplinary review of the territory.

Choay defined urban as a system valid either in the city or in the country, composed of networks and exchanges of material and immaterial systems, and announced the death of the city (Choay 1994/1999) – a death that occurs rather frequently, whenever a quick and noticeable mutation changes the form of the city (Borja, Drnda, Iglesias, Fiori, & Muxí, 2003, p. 23).

The city / country opposition is central to the model of Garden City: Howard's analysis led him to distinguish the advantages and disadvantages of city and country as isolated entities, proposing a third way – neither city nor country, but a combination capable to gather only the positives aspects of both, which he synthesized in the form of the "Three Magnets" diagram (Howard 1898/1902, pp. 15-16).

The Garden City would translate, in this way, an approximation to the values of country life, in a relation with nature that was already sought in medieval times (Mumford 1961/1966, p. 351) and that remains contemporary<sup>2</sup>, which we can relate to the still presence of the city and country archetypes, even if displaced from reality: the contemporary man insists on living in an imaginary, pre-industrial and well defined city, opposed to the countryside (Borja et al., 2003, p. 40), repeating meaningless dichotomies – as the city as an historical centre and the country as a typical village (Domingues 2013, p. 36) – and inscribing

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<sup>2</sup> As the man still needs a direct and personal contact with Nature (Rémy & Voyé, 1992/1994, p. 47).

them into the basis of his planning systems<sup>3</sup>. Still, signs of contamination are beginning to arise<sup>4</sup>, as we recognize city and country integration as a key aspect of innovation in the contemporary city (Soares 2005, p. 18).

Despite the fact that the country can still be read as a place of production (agriculture) and work (landscape) (Lefebvre 1968/1991, p. 67), Howard had already questioned the archetype of the country as a place exclusively linked to agricultural practice (Howard 1898/1902, p. 15) refusing a functional<sup>5</sup> vision of the city even before it achieved notoriety with the Modern Movement, and failed in our contemporary time<sup>6</sup>.

But the model of the Garden City exceeded the formal archetype of country life: Howard presented the model as having great potential from the economic view (Howard 1898/1902, p. 32), referring to the effects that a controlled transformation of country in city would bring to the community; a transformation that would be supported by the migration of population towards the Garden Cities which would, by itself, add value to the lands (Howard 1898/1902, p. 28), bring better life quality to the inhabitants and lower their rents<sup>7</sup>, and bring closer the cooperation between public and private sectors of society.

The flexibility of this cooperation and the refusal of ideological dichotomies between public and private roles in the development of the city<sup>8</sup> was an important part of Howard's Garden City proposal: Howard argues for a municipal

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in the Portuguese planning system, issues related to the obligation of defining an urban perimeter (Ferreira 2004, p. 24) that separates land into rural and urban (Carvalho 2012, p. 8), deeply inscribed as a fundamental principle of the planning system (Soares 2005, p. 21).

<sup>4</sup> In the Portuguese planning system the law "Decreto Regulamentar 11/2009" tries to go beyond the simplistic distinction urban/rural by conceiving rural areas with dispersed urbanity and urban areas with low densities (Carvalho 2012, p. 8).

<sup>5</sup> Howard also conceived the construction of a Garden City as a process during which the buildings could accommodate several functions accordingly to the communities' most urgent needs (Howard 1898/1902, p. 45).

<sup>6</sup> The "culturalistic" and "humanistic" model of the Garden City (Choay 1994/1999, p. 70) contrasts with the functional and parametric model of post-war urbanism (Busquets 1995, p. 95) which was compromised by the excess of division and segregation it has promoted.

<sup>7</sup> The Garden City model was supported by a principle of rate-rent, capable of providing economic sustainability to the community in the long term.

<sup>8</sup> The municipality's monopoly as provider of primary care services could be lost if privates could demonstrate a better capacity to supply them (Howard 1898/1902, p. 27).

initiative without meaning the full municipalisation of the city's industries nor the elimination of private enterprises (Howard 1898/1902, p. 68), positioning himself between socialism and individualism (Howard 1898/1902, p. 69), refusing the inflexibility of the former and the discretion of the latter<sup>9</sup>, assuming the variable nature of the services covered by the Garden City as a reflex of its continuous performance assessment (Howard 1898/1902, p. 70).

These issues are of equal relevance when related to the uncertainties of contemporary urban planning, and the urgent need to make it more flexible, as shown by several authors (Portas 1995, p. 32; Soares 2004, p. 101; Borja et al., 2003, pp. 24-25; Silva & Cruz, 1995, p. 45).

Urbanity has ceased to be an exclusive feature of the city (Domingues 2013, p. 37) and its limits are increasingly hard to trace if we intend to do it against a country that no longer matches its archetype and shows no substantial social and cultural difference from the city (Soares 2005, p. 19); the construction of urbanity has also ceased to be the exclusive competence of the public sector, weakened in its ability to intervene<sup>10</sup>, to be opened to partnerships with the private sector, to international capital and to a strategic and entrepreneurial management (Moreira 2004, p. 30) considered more effective for its flexibility, adaptability to circumstances and to uncertainties, but still in need of democratic control and transparency (Borja et al., 2003, p. 90) and capable of, by itself, generate new kinds of uncertainty.

## **The coexistence of the compact and of the dispersed**

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<sup>9</sup> We can see, for instance, the proposed "semi-municipal" character of the Garden City's market – a private initiative under public control (Howard 1898/1902, p. 76).

<sup>10</sup> Especially the Central Governments, unable to control all and every aspect of the contemporary society (Gonçalves 2007, p. 94).

The concentration of people and activities in the cities allowed them to be, throughout history, clearly delimited against the surrounding fields, dispersed by nature – a boundary that was clear not only in morphological terms, but also in social, cultural and economic ones, translated into a clear correlation between concentration and the notion of centre (Borja et al., 2003, p. 35).

The relative stability of this model was compromised by the technological advancements and urban dynamics unleashed by the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, responsible for pronounced migrations from the countryside to the cities – which the Garden City movement and the New Towns program intended to reverse.

The excessive concentration of people and activities in the cities – especially London – led Howard to propose the Garden City experience. He was not directly criticizing city and country by themselves, but rather the concentration of the former as opposed to the emptiness of the latter, arguing for the need of a new balance (Howard 1898/1902, pp. 10-13).

Thus, more than criticizing the slow persistence of the city and country “formal” archetypes, Howard was criticizing the rapid transformation of economic and social relations and their impact on the territory and their people: poor housing conditions combined with high rents. Garden City was proposed as a response to this problem, a solution that would not only offer better living conditions but also better rents when compared with those practiced in dense urban areas such as London. Instead of concentrating people in tall buildings, Howard intended to disperse them throughout fields and gardens (Howard 1898/1902, p. 54).

The topic of concentration plays, therefore, an important role not only in the Garden City experience but also in the ability to read the contemporary city and the archetype of city itself: urbanity has been frequently associated to concentration and its development and multiplication to growth. Urbanity is being measured in terms of dimensions and of densities (Guerra 1993, p. 106). However, this concentration no longer corresponds to the reality, thanks to the explosion of the compact cities driven by more efficient means of transportation

and communication and by the inability of the Modern Movement ideal to resist to contemporary societies' needs. The dispersion is now recognized as an urban fact, together with concentration, revealing new forms of living and economic and social organization of a discontinuous and fragmented society.

When reading the contemporary territory, especially certain regions of southern Europe such as Ave valley (Portugal) and Veneto (Italy), one finds out that the dichotomy concentration / dispersion is not an option but a reality (Borja et al., 2003, p. 96; Soares 2005, p. 12): the compact city is just one piece of the urban puzzle (Domingues & Silva, 2004, p. 8) and is not, by itself, sign of urbanity<sup>11</sup> or of centre. Diffuse and compact city co-exist and complement themselves, and this tendency grows stronger<sup>12</sup> as more effective means of transport and communication are being developed as they favour, on the one hand, concentration in regional and national metropolises while, on the other hand, they promote punctual or linear forms of dispersion (Choay 1994/1999, p. 83).

We can also see this dichotomy fading in Howard's experience since, on the one hand, he proposed the development of several contained and concentrated networks of Garden Cities dispersed throughout open country, connected with railways, keeping in this way the formal integrity of each Garden City and the green belt surrounding them (Howard 1898/1902, pp. 130-131). Several Garden Cities arranged in networks and articulated with a Central City would become part of a wider territorial arrangement where even London, forced to rebuild itself, would ultimately find its place.

This model of a network of cities would eventually become reality as a set of formal, organized and planned actions<sup>13</sup>, as Howard intended, but also as informal responses of a society too complex in its interests, aspirations and

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<sup>11</sup> The diffused urbanization does not necessarily imply the concentration of people, and they can still be called "urban" or "citizens" despite living in a dispersed territory where housing, agriculture and work are mixed together (Ferreira & Salgueiro, 2000, p. 181).

<sup>12</sup> Although at different rhythms, with "old towns" becoming dense at a higher pace than diffuse territories (Portas 2007, p. 91).

<sup>13</sup> Such as the New Towns program or the more recent Growth Areas program.

goals, and sufficiently provided with transport and communication means to carry them out. In contemporary urban planning it is argued the need to structure these dispersed centres in networks (Portas 2007, p. 90; Soares 2005, p. 14) to be able to balance territorial differences – not eliminate them – promoting functional complementarity rather than intending to turn dispersion into concentration, because dispersed territories are also signs of urbanity, but of a different kind distinct from the one present in the city's archetype.

### **Diversity in the New Towns post-war program**

The theoretical model of Garden City<sup>14</sup> would (and keeps) inspiring the development of New Towns in different contexts and countries and with different purposes. The success of this model might as well have less to do with formal aspects than it had with the overall project of social reorganization it contained inside its complete town (Choay 1994/1999, p. 80).

The New Towns did not translate into an unique response to an unique problem, but rather into variable responses adapted to the specific objectives and uncertainties of each place and time – although they had several features in common with Howard's proposal, namely the willingness to break up with a problematic reality and to plan from the start the whole future of a community.

The relevance of the themes and issues raised by the New Town experiences have transcended their time and remain contemporary, like the aforementioned relationship between city and country, concentration and dispersion, and others such as the notion of centre and concentric growth, functional self-sufficiency and complementary, autonomy and dependence, planning from scratch versus developing existing settlements, and public and private roles in urban development.

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<sup>14</sup> Let us remind that Howard did not specify a design or specific place, but only thoughts and diagrams to be adjusted to specific sites and locations.

We can draw some conclusions on the effective implementation of Howard's model in the New Towns program. The relocation of urban population away from the major urban centres, namely London, turned out to be motivated by the need to solve the housing shortage caused by war bombings in 1940 and 1941 (Osborn 1947, p. 4) which gave rise to the first stage of the New Towns program and their designation around London, following the 1944 Greater London Plan of Sir Patrick Abercrombie. Another stage would come out later on the sixties and seventies, this time concerning more provincial New Towns.

The relationship between city and country in the New Towns is a topic where we can draw some conclusions. Currently the classification of English land between urban<sup>15</sup> and rural is not limited to these two global containers, but rather it extends towards four types of urban and six types of rural land – overcoming the simplistic dichotomy and taking into account other variables such as type of settlement and its location in more or less dispersed contexts (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs 2013).

Most of these New Towns are classified today as city-urban-compact. The New Towns around London as well as the nearest ones to the north are all classified in this way, except for Hemel Hempstead which is part of large urban conurbation of London. The same happens for the New Towns along Birmingham and along the large urban conurbation Manchester-Liverpool, with the exception of Skelmersdale. In the North of England, Newton Aycliffe and Peterlee follow this trend, while Washington is also caught in the context of an urban conurbation. The New Towns are therefore eminently urban and compact, while the city dispersed context (New Town or not) is practically non-existent<sup>16</sup>. Surrounding these New Towns we find a complex area of multiple layers of urbanity and rurality way more complex than the countryside as it was thought by Howard.

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<sup>15</sup> The quality of urban is given to continuous built-up areas of more than 10000 inhabitants.

<sup>16</sup> This type of city corresponds only to 0.2% of the whole English territory (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs 2013).

The New Towns experience demonstrated clearly the impossibility of keeping with the numbers proposed by Howard – 32000 inhabitants for a 1000 acres city. The reality surpassed in large scale Howard's intentions, and even the smallest New Towns exceeded those values (Office for National Statistics 2012).

Finally, the urban structure of the New Towns was multiple and varied depending on the particular time, location and dynamics of the program: from a linear expression with a grid more (as in Basildon) or less (as in Hatfield) evident, to a radial expression as in Crawley, Bracknell or Welwyn, to more complex and hybrid states such as Stevenage or Milton Keynes; from punctual green spaces and parks (as in Hatfield and Basildon) to more extensive green areas, such as Milton Keynes and Stevenage; from dispersed industries and warehouses in the city limits (as in Hatfield) to linear concentrations in the city limits as well (as in Basildon) or in the city centre (as in Welwyn).

This diversity is noticeable not only in the New Towns by themselves, but also when we look at the regional level: the New Towns are sometimes surrounded by rural areas, as in most of the New Towns of the first generation around London (which successfully contained its excessive growth), and are sometimes limited or in the vicinity of a large conurbation, as in Skelmersdale, Warrington and Runcorn, near the extensive built area polarized by Liverpool and Manchester.

### **Conclusion: the uncertainty of an archetype**

Although the planning associated with the New Towns program has managed to pass a clear and emblematic quality of urbanity, central in promoting the image and identity of these places (Department for Communities and Local Government & Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University, 2006, p. 14),

the New Towns program has proved to be multiple in terms of its objectives and applications<sup>17</sup> and uncertain about its results.

It is recognized a greater homogeneity in the planning of the New Towns of the first generation when compared with the latest experiments (Department for Communities and Local Government & Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University, 2006, p. 12), a situation explained by several factors that, throughout time, changed or became more complex, bringing uncertainty (and diversity) to the developments.

The power struggle between public and private sectors came to a clear transformation. If, in the first experiments of the New Towns, the influence of the public sector and power granted to the New Towns Development Corporations was evident, the trend has been towards the dispersion of this power between various entities – local authorities, central government and private companies – making it harder to manage and maintain the newer New Towns (Town and Country Planning Association 2011, p. 29) and yielding an increased dependence on private companies as a way to generate growth (Department for Communities and Local Government & Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University, 2006, p. 13). As the New Towns program evolved, people were already claiming the right for the purchase and possession of their homes, instead of having to rent them (Department for Communities and Local Government & Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University, 2006, p. 11). The impossibility to do this in the early stages of the program has, according to some authors, limited the profile of the New Towns residents (Bennett 2005, p. 8).

The power balance between the public sector multiple organisms was also transformed, especially the relationship between central and local powers. The Garden Cities and New Towns taught us the importance of letting the local

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<sup>17</sup> Stevenage, for example, is a completely different experience if compared to Peterborough: a self-sufficient city on the one hand versus an extension of an existing one, on the other (Town and Country Planning Association 2011, p. 8).

community benefit from the management of their own assets in order to re-invest on them for their benefit; the absence of this ability, as advocated by Howard (Howard 1898/1902, pp. 21) has brought fund-raising problems in several New Towns needed for urgent infrastructural renovations (Town and Country Planning Association 2014, pp. 16-17). Thus, the willingness to bring planning closer to the communities<sup>18</sup>, financial constraints and the difficulty in articulating a centrally-driven New Town designation with local consent (Town and Country Planning Association 2014, p. 11) is leading the Central government to avoid taking the lead role as it once had (Town and Country Planning Association 2011, p. 23). The partnerships between local authorities and privates will therefore assume greater relevance in the next generation of New Towns (Town and Country Planning Association 2011, p. 7), although it's argued to be the responsibility of both local and central powers to gather the conditions for private investment, especially in the beginning of the developments, when the uncertainty is higher (Town and Country Planning Association 2011, p. 25).

The intent of "forging" self-sufficient and balanced communities, as proposed by the New Towns program, was also questioned. Relocating poor urbanized people from London was proven to have cut their strong emotional and social ties (Bennett 2005, p. 7), while the New Towns, with their policy of linking housing to working, excluded everyone who was not suitable to work (Bennett 2005, p. 8).

The belief that a change of environment was enough to solve the problems of the most disadvantaged social classes of the Industrial Revolution also proved to be mistaken (Madge 1962, p. 208): the dispersive nature, low density, functional segregation and spatial monotony of the spaces and buildings in most New Towns ultimately hindered the possibility of creating a community<sup>19</sup> and generated a feeling of alienation (Department for Communities and Local

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<sup>18</sup> As implied in the "Localism Act 2011" and in the "General Power of Competence" introduced in its context (Local Government Association 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Low density and functional segregation led to higher commuting, contrary to what the New Towns program advocated.

Government & Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University, 2006, p. 78; Madge 1962, p. 211). It was being realized the impossibility of moving entire neighbourhoods and maintaining their social relations (Madge 1962, p. 211) and that one's response to a place was dependent more on social, economic and community factors than on physical ones (Department for Communities and Local Government & Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University, 2006, p. 78). This explains why contemporary urban planning is increasingly multi-disciplinary.

The sense of isolation and self-sufficiency of the New Towns was also losing its reason to be. This kind of understanding was already present after the first generation of New Towns was completed: although still being required a clear definition of the city and of its limits, it was recognized that from a social and economic point of view this definition made no sense (Madge 1962, pp. 218-219). Today the regional level is gaining special relevance in connecting communities (Bennett 2005, p. 11).

Finally, contemporary urban planning is revealing that a rigid planning model based on inflexible master plans is not adequate to today's territories' needs, and a greater flexibility is necessary (Department for Communities and Local Government & Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University, 2006, p. 14) for planning to accommodate uncertainty and change, adapt to the communities' needs and promote the resilience of places (Town and Country Planning Association 2011, p. 32). The master plan is now understood as part of a process and not as the end product itself (Department for Communities and Local Government & Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University, 2006, p. 79). Partnerships remain today more dispersed, resulting from the diffusion of responsibilities between public and private entities, but are necessary to ensure local democracy and participation (Department for Communities and Local Government & Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University 2006, p. 58).

We are moving towards an increasingly limited planning, questioned by uncertainty to an extent where one can ask if it's still worth it. Our idealistic visions of city and country are changing. More than persistent and timeless,

archetypes are undergoing profound changes and no longer match the reality; and uncertainty appears to be anything but transitory. If we expect to efficiently manage our complex contemporary territories we must find a way to inscribe flexibility into the formal planning system while allowing some extent of responsible informality.

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