



HOW TO BUILD THE PERFECT TOWN

AS A NEW INITIATIVE IS LAUNCHED TO HELP REVIVE URBAN AREAS LEFT STRUGGLING IN THE WAKE OF INDUSTRIAL AND RETAIL UPHEAVAL, MULTI-AWARD-WINNING POET AND AUTHOR JOHN BURNSIDE SETS OUT HIS VISION OF AN IDEAL 21ST-CENTURY TOWN

FOR a long time, it has been depressing to visit many of the towns that, historically, formed the bedrock of Scotland's industry and culture; places that, first as a native son and then as the child of economic migrants, I used to regard with deep-rooted, defiant pride – in spite of their defects.

To a boy from Cowdenbeath, it was always clear where those defects originated: social inequality meant that some got to exploit their talents, while others were quietly suffocated. Meanwhile, the pillaging of our utilities, industries and natural resources, first under Thatcher, but maintained ever since, has allowed an increasingly callous economic system to transform thriving, hard-working towns into twilight zones, their confidence gone, their children unemployable, civic pride less defiant than forlorn.

Fishing towns, steel towns, pit towns, towns where industrial craftsmen of the first order built ships, wove textiles and made the world's finest alcoholic beverage – all suffered

in a changing climate where quality was sacrificed for short-term profits, working-class solidarity became a Citizen Smith caricature and independent shopkeepers were replaced by bland, non-native chains.

The establishment of Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP) is therefore both timely and welcome. The body exists to deliver the Town Centre Action Plan – the Scottish Government's drive to improve these urban areas, many of which have struggled to reinvent themselves following the loss of the industries that once defined them, and the shift to online shopping and out-of-town retail.

"While cities were quick to replace ship-building and manufacturing with finance, business services, education, retail and tourism," says the partnership's chief officer Phil Prentice, "our towns found it more difficult to reinvent their role and function."

Those towns are home to some 70 per cent of Scotland's population, and as Mr Prentice points out, there is "no silver bullet solution" to the complex challenges confronting them. "A good start to the fight back is to energise

and empower people and communities," he says. "We must look to the long term and be pragmatic as well as creative ... Let's look at how planning can embrace the key themes of accessibility, enterprise, digital, living, community and proactive planning."

It is a programme with which no sensible person would argue: urban sprawl not only eviscerates the town, it also has other environmental impacts, while the more accessible our towns become, especially to cyclists and pedestrians, the more likely they are to be enjoyable places to inhabit.

So, what might we come up with in our vision of the liveable 21st-century town? A model town that balances those themes that Mr Prentice sets out as primary to STP's goals (I will take the liberty of adding one other – ecological – which is no doubt implied in the STP list, but which seems worth foregrounding)? My own memories of living in two embattled working-class industrial towns suggests that certain key institutions cannot help but make any town a better place to live, no matter what other factors are in play.

For example, what single building was once deemed more worthy of pride, historically, than the central library? Once upon a time, a good library (preferably set in its own grounds and in a central location) was a place of learning, of private and sometimes idiosyncratic pleasures, an information point and a key landmark in any self-respecting town. Now, it seems, we use the web; which is to say, Wikipedia. Yet there are questions over how reliable the web is, and how susceptible to manipulation.

A central library, with a range of information sources from books (especially local history and topography books), to guided web research, to expertise in digital narrative or documentary software, not only proclaims a town's commitment to learning and freedom of debate, it also acts as a serious focal point for its community. Add to it an art, or local history or specialist museum – one that responds to the history and ecology of the place – and a venue for musical and theatrical performances (to be used by both local and visiting artists)

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