

Green Prosperity

BY HAYLEY FITCHETT

The struggle of the U.K.'s former industrial regions to revive their fortunes has led them to broaden their idea of sustainability to include social and economic prosperity.

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For the fast-growing industrial economies of China and India, sustainable development means “green” development. The focus of government programs and regulations is on such environmental goals as preventing or reversing air and groundwater pollution and increasing the use of renewable (and nonpolluting) energy sources. In western Europe, a 60-year shift to a postindustrial economy has failed to lift all boats. With many of its industrial regions still facing high unemployment and an outflow of young people in search of better opportunities, turning this around has become the highest priority.

The traditional North/South divide in the U.K. is a good example of this phenomenon. Along with agriculture, the South has seen its traditional industrial base “evaporate.” Its place has been taken by the financial services sector, which employs more than 450,000 people in London and the South East. Another 525,000 people in London work for the creative industries—more than twice the number so employed in New York City.

The North of England retains some heavy industry as an employment base, but Chinese and Indian competition is finally putting it in real jeopardy. Seeing the writing on the wall, the region's remaining industrial cities are mimicking the South by trying to replace manufacturing jobs with employment in the creative industries. The education sector is also expanding as these cities' universities attract students from overseas. Since 2000, student enrollment in their programs from China has increased 75 percent per year thanks to their strategic alliances with Chinese universities.

Given these trends, cities in the North of England and elsewhere in western Europe are looking beyond environmental quality per se to ask how to revive themselves economically and socially. In the process, they are redefining how a postindustrial society thinks about sustainability. That in turn is leading them to embrace strategies for renewal aimed at creating healthy communities in the broadest sense of the term.

City Repair in the U.K.'s North

Mending the gaps in the urban fabric created by the decline of manufacturing is a critical focus of sustainable development in the North of England. Recent proposals exemplify the range of strategies being explored. A plan for Edinburgh's Carlton Gate quarter, a declining industrial area next to the city's Old Town, proposed to recast it as a transit-served arts and entertainment center. Located within a World Heritage area, the plan emulated traditional patterns of development there as it sought to weave in new uses and increase density.

Carlton Gate would have been privately developed. In Glasgow, the city and regional councils and Scottish Enterprise, Scotland's main economic development agency, have teamed to redevelop Clyde Gateway, a 2,000-acre industrial site—one of the U.K.'s largest regeneration projects. Once a world center for shipbuilding and ship repair, Glasgow's East End has lost its economic base. Clyde Gateway aims to reverse its long-term decline. New housing development and comprehensive public infrastructure will shift perceptions of the area in the minds of the public and investors, helping to repopulate it and revive its fortunes. The Antwerp region of Belgium is pursuing a similar strategy. Both aim to create denser communities set within former industrial land, some of which will be restored as publicly accessible open space for recreation and nature.

Blackpool, the world's first "populist" seaside resort, recently proposed to develop a new Conference and Leisure Quarter that would put the city back on the map as a European conference and convention destination. Ultramodern in concept, the new quarter favors the iconic over the thematic, redefining leisure for a 21st century audience—a strategy also being pursued in Las Vegas. In both cities, sustainability in the environmental sense is seen as a crucial part of the modern lifestyle, but Blackpool is accessible by regional rail transit, as are most other northern cities. That strong commitment to public transit has led many of them to extend their existing networks with tramlines and dedicated bus ways. In the U.K., tramlines are funded by the central government, while bus ways are funded locally, so cities are increasingly opting for the latter as a

cheaper and faster way to extend their existing transit networks. Trams can come later.

High-tech Revival in the South

In the South, the M4 transport corridor that extends west from London to Swindon—the U.K.'s equivalent of Silicon Valley—has seen substantial private sector redevelopment. Consider London Gate, the conversion of a thirties industrial complex, a former EMI research center and record factory. Located four minutes from a rail station that is just ten minutes by train from London's Heathrow Airport, London Gate combines high-tech loft offices with on-site amenities like a restaurant, café, and fitness center. Or consider the famous Ealing Studios. A working film studio since 1902, the studio complex and its environs have been recast as a "media village" at the heart of West London's "creative corridor"—an area where two-thirds of London's interactive media industry is located, employing some 36,000 people. Seven miles from Heathrow and served by three subway stations, the "village" includes a residential component to help balance jobs with housing.

The Role of Higher Education

Universities and colleges can often give added traction to an industrial city's efforts to shift to a post-industrial economy. Ealing's revival as a new media center prompted nearby Ealing & West London College to open the Ealing Institute of Media in September 2005 to train the area's growing digital workforce. In the Netherlands, the industrial city of Delft partnered with its technical university to shift its economic base from chemicals and manufacturing to environmental science and information technology. By locating these new activities in a 310-acre Technopolis within the city's former industrial zone, Delft has also preserved its historic core, a worldwide tourist destination and a major factor in the city's ability to attract and retain a talented workforce.

The Role of the Community

Sustainable development whose focus is as much social and economic as environmental usually emerges in the U.K. and western Europe from comprehensive regional planning. Current efforts to revive Blackpool, for example, are part of a broader strategic plan for England's North West Region put together by its government and development agency. The project itself is a public/private partnership in which Blackpool is also involved. The mechanism for the city's redevelopment is an Urban Regeneration Company (URC), one of 23 formed in the U.K. since 1999 to help cities and districts find new economic life.

The growing acceptance of socioeconomic sustainability as a goal of redevelopment in U.K. cities is leading private sector developers to engage the community proactively in the planning and design process. While part of their motivation is to smooth the way for planning permissions (entitlements in U.S. parlance), they also see the longer-term benefit of involving people and organizations with a real stake in the success of the project. In the end, a shared vision of a city's or a district's future is likelier to "stick" if the community is solidly behind it.

As with nature, too, success breeds success. If sustainable development in postindustrial Europe is no longer solely focused on environmental quality, it's because Europeans see thriving communities as the best guarantor of healthy cities and regions in the future.

Hayley Fitchett is an associate and senior planner with Gensler's London office. She is a co-author of *Building Better Neighbourhoods* (CABE) and *Living Places* (ODPM), recent publications that deal with issues of urban regeneration in post-industrial England. Contact her at hayley_fitchett@gensler.com or +44 (0)20 7073 9988.