

THOUGHT PIECE 5

Are cities future-proof? Some thoughts from North East England

By Chris Dobson (freelance journalist, contributor to Newcastle upon Tyne symposium)

Looking to the future was easy for Dan Dare, the pilot of the future as portrayed in the 1950s classic Eagle magazines. It was exciting, fast-moving with just one drawback – but it was mere science fiction.

That said these mid-‘50s publications had a good measure of fanciful references to ‘interplanetary space fleet’ – we are certainly heading that way. Clearly written at a time when space travel was just a dream, by contrast today’s planners and everybody involved in the built environment have had statistics and clear warnings about the future of our planet with time to do something about it.

This should have enabled them to future-proof development and ‘the city’ in particular. But to continue the Dan Dare link, he is quoted while looking at a space-age building “the old place hasn’t changed much”. This can be said for the built environment generally. We are really only now stepping up to the sustainability mark. Retro-fitting sustainability into older buildings is an eye-watering prospect.

Are there signs of anything being done to mitigate the greatest threat, climate change? Well Tees Valley Combined Authority has just launched its Strategic Transport Plan which is all about ‘getting people where they want to be, when they want to be there’ which is why £257m has been committed to developing a transport network covering all forms of transport as well as sustainable travel like walking and cycling routes.

To look into the future of a city such as Newcastle upon Tyne, it’s worthwhile reminding ourselves about its history. Acknowledging that Celts roamed about, it was the Romans who occupied the north and built the first bridge across the Tyne. Thus Pons Aelius was born.

Clearly visibly as far back as the 1200s was Westgate Road and the Norman castle, the Cathedral, Guildhall and Blackfriars, all visible today.

But what of current development in the city? The landmark project is the redevelopment of the former Scottish & Newcastle Breweries site in the St James area of the city into Newcastle Helix , a £350m project that will create over 20,000 jobs.

Complete with its own centralised energy system which will supply affordable heating to all businesses and homes on site and save 30,650 tonnes of carbon emissions over 40 years, there is a real sense of something outstanding happening here.

But the future is not just about demolition and replacement but also about protection of the city’s immense heritage. Typically these buildings are magnificent in their own individual way such as the Lit & Phil library, Trinity House, Bolbec Hall, the Guildhall and Neville Hall, home of North of England Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers, itself presently the subject of a much needed £7.1m investment.

But the issue affecting us all has to be climate change and this includes an urgent solution to the ever-present car and pollution arising. This will require tackling the sensitive area of behaviour

change however small to improve air quality. At the time of writing the initial proposal for Newcastle was rejected by public vote which shows the difficulties ahead.

The issue is city centre working when most workers live outside the city. Unlike many European cities which have the same 'rush hour' syndrome, more people live in the city and can walk to work or use the appropriate Metro. I cite Paris and Milan as good examples.

Newcastle has a splendid Metro and Central Station for commuters from afar but nevertheless major accesses by road in every direction are choked twice a day. Too few live in the city centre is the blunt fact.

Newcastle's Grainger Town is the magnificent part of the city with marvellous buildings that would be residential if Newcastle had been Edinburgh. Alas most are commercial without the vibrancy of residential occupation. Some developers have spotted opportunities and have delivered outstanding residential developments. At 121 – 127 Grainger Street, a Grade I Listed, five storey building, has recently been converted the three upper floors into 10 studio and one bed apartments. So it can be done.

Samantha Curtis, Curtis PDC, planning and development consultancy, agrees though she makes the point that only a property which is not listed a change of use could be permitted. With about 50% of Grainger Town's properties 'listed' converting buildings in Grainger Town to residential will be a challenge.

Miss Curtis says change of use to residential could work bearing in mind there would be noise issues to contend with but at the end of it could result in "fantastic examples of sustainable development", in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework.

Miss Curtis adds: "We do need more residential space in the city centre to compete with other metropolitan cities. What is needed are many more developments to boost the city centre population. With people comes spending power, essential for a city's economy and well-being just as you would find in comparable European cities."

The future revolves around transport, sustainability and accessibility to the city centre. Developers are aware and sustainability is being taken seriously but the fact that one building such a Durham City's Fram Well scheme is flagged up as super-sustainable rather suggests that much more should be done.

Chris Dobson is a freelance editor, writer, columnist, journalist and researcher as well as Property and landscape photographer, and winner of 'Best use of Marketing' Award