

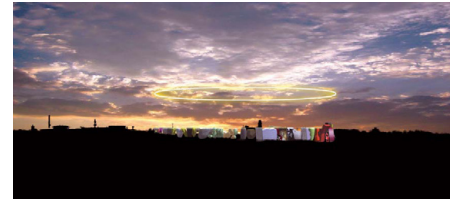
1.1 STEPPING INTO THE ARENA

Early in 2003 everyone heard about Barnsley. The town produced a Strategic Development Framework called *Remaking Barnsley* that was eye-catching because of its slogan “Barnsley is a Tuscan hill village.....” and because of the futuristic images produced by the document’s author Will Alsop (fig. 1).

The aim of the masterplan is to achieve a step change in the regeneration of the borough, which had declined to being the 16th most deprived district out of 354 English districts on the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2000. (Alsop, 2003, 15)

In March of 2007 the Estates Gazette published a feature (fig. 2) estimating the UK urban regeneration masterplan industry to be worth £100m p.a. and growing fast, and then going on to highlight the scepticism amongst some in the property business arising from the fact that too many masterplans exist simply to be “launched”, and once they have achieved the necessary publicity are not used because they were undeliverable in the first place. Alsop’s work generally is cited, and *Remaking Barnsley* in particular, as a prime example of the “blue-sky” approach and is compared with the more pragmatic work of GMW Architects.

Because it is so bold, Alsop’s work in Barnsley is an easy target for those who are cynical about masterplans. There are undoubtedly many masterplans worthy of this particular criticism, but do *Remaking Barnsley’s* futuristic images actually disguise a solid body of sound work?



“Barnsley is a Tuscan hill village, there’s no doubt about it: Barnsley is a Tuscan hill village, the red roofs of the simple houses glow like tomatoes from Barnsley market in the impossibly beautiful light of the gala bingo by the bus station, because: Barnsley is a Tuscan hill village...”

Figure 1: page 10 from *Remaking Barnsley: Strategic Development Framework 2003 - 2033* (Alsop, 2003).

The quote is from a poem by Ian McMillan, the poet and broadcaster based in Darfield.



Figure 2: p106 of Estates Gazette, 3 March 2007 beginning of the feature by David Thame

What then are the features of this work that attract so much attention? Image and substance: the view, at its extreme, would be that it is all image and no substance. In terms of urbanism, image might be translated as a place's identity, and substance might be regarded as providing a credible framework for regeneration. These are, perhaps, the most important attributes any masterplan can help to deliver for a place and *Remaking Barnsley* is no exception in articulating its vision in these terms: (substance) "The vision for remaking Barnsley is a vision for economic regeneration,....." (p. 11); and (image) "Barnsley is a Tuscan hill village,....." (p.10) accompanied by the image shown at fig. 1.

1.2 PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The polarisation of views, so well articulated by David Thame (2007), is all too prevalent and unhelpful. Most people find it too easy to fall into one or other position, bypassing the benefit of giving the substantive issues their proper consideration, which if more understood would help to raise the quality of the endeavour and thereby the rate of success in transforming the urban environment.

A sort of false duality has arisen in the professional world between a "visionary" and a technocratic" model of masterplanning - or between passion and competence, perhaps. Those commissioning masterplans should demand the best of both worlds. (Stewart, 2007, vol.3, 23)

As well as suggesting an important question (is it all image and no substance?) *Remaking Barnsley* is an important example. Barnsley exemplifies *par excellence* the plight of so many towns whose *raison d'être* has been swept aside by the changing face of the modern world - the shift from the industrial age of modernity to the informational age of post modernity. Barnsley is stranded with no obvious means of spontaneously regenerating and therefore in need of the very best intervention that can be mustered.

It seems, therefore, that there is a useful place for an attempt to learn the lessons from this "high profile" example of a masterplan, whereby more knowledge can be fed back into the system and, at least, lead to a more informed debate or, better still, to more informed and therefore better practice in the art and science of masterplanning. This purpose of this dissertation is to uncover more knowledge in this field by pursuing the following research questions:

1. What is the role of a masterplan in the process of urban regeneration?
2. What criteria should comprise a critical framework for assessing masterplans?
3. Theoretically, how good a masterplan is Remaking Barnsley?
4. How well does *Remaking Barnsley* fulfill its stated objectives of helping the town shape an appropriate identity for itself, and giving it a good framework for regeneration.



Figure 3:
can a masterplan be more than self referential? Utopian City by Nigel Peake. (Source: Blueprint, December 2006, 114)

box 1.1

FOR AND AGAINST: examples of views from the property world

Gwyn Roberts concludes an article in Property Weekly with:

The leader of Barnsley Council, Steve Houghton, dismissed the town's faded and ugly 1960's buildings as being the products of a purely commerce driven masterplan. The next time he takes a look at Alsop's splendid vision he may reflect that good design needs to be workable as well as spectacular. (Roberts. 2005, 49);

and in Estates Gazette's Focus on South Yorkshire Natalie Martin asserts:

The original masterplan for the town was put forward by controversial architect Will Alsop, who wanted to turn the town into a Tuscan village. These proposals were not so much thrown out as laughed out. (Martin, 2007, 156)

While the masterplan was promoted by the Regional Development Agency, Yorkshire Forward, another arm of government seemed to be launching a scathing broadside. Jon Rouse, while still chairman of CABE in 2004, wrote in an article in Building Design shortly before CABE launched

Creating Successful Masterplans: a guide for clients (2004):

We are now seeing too many architect-led plans where the model almost seems to have dropped out of the sky, with little regard for land values, ownership or assembly. (Rouse, 2004)

Also in an interview with Sutherland Lyall felt that this was an attack on his approach:

.....I was surprised that he felt he could say anything on this topic because he's not a planner, he's a civil servant. He has the idea that if an image is exciting, it's dangerous. (Lyall, ca2005, 5)

Lyall points out that, although extraordinary images can interfere with perception and the propositions behind them, it would be a mistake to imagine that Alsop's architecture and masterplanning are based on anything other than hard research and lengthy interactions with the local public.

His office has more commissions for buildings and masterplans on the go than any "straight" office could hope for in a decade. (Lyall, 2005)

Croydon, Bradford, New Islington (Manchester), Middlehaven and Walsall are all examples of this, and his book *Supercity* (Hulme, ed., 2005) demonstrate that he is no lightweight in trying to understand contemporary urban issues.

This critique will be focused around the themes of identity and regeneration (image and substance) because as noted earlier, they are what *Remaking Barnsley* stakes its reputation on and because, as will become apparent ahead, they represent for many the overriding motives for embarking on any masterplan in the first place.