'Utopian urges: visions for reconstruction in Britain, 1940–1950'

Matthew Hollow

Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience, Durham University

Abstract

In popular culture, the 1940s have often been presented as a period in which architects and town planners became caught up in naive, unrealistic 'utopian fantasies' about how to go about rebuilding Britain's bomb-damaged cities. To counter these claims, historians have increasingly sought to downplay the idealism of the period; emphasizing the pragmatic and restrained elements of the reconstruction proposals instead. This article attempts to tell a different story. Adopting a more nuanced and holistic approach to the idea of 'utopia', it demonstrates that, despite being highly practical and matter of fact, the reconstruction proposals put forward in this period were, nonetheless, still heavily idealistic and aspirational; suggesting that planners were, in this era at least, able to channel their 'utopian impulses' into visions of the future that were at once both idealistic and pragmatic.

Keywords: utopianism; 1940s; reconstruction; exhibitions; housing

Utopias are real in the sense that they have material, pedagogical, and ultimately political effects, shaping the ways people understand and, as a consequence, act in their worlds'.[1]

Introduction

As any student of post-war reconstruction will no doubt be aware, the term 'utopian' has become something of a dirty phrase amongst historians of this period. Amongst those who have sought to condemn the planning profession, it has tended to be used derogatorily to disparage what is seen as the misguided naivety and idealism of the period, with post-war planners harshly depicted as deluded idealists and 'utopians unwilling to engage with reality'.[2] By contrast, those historians who have sought to challenge this narrative and paint a more positive picture of the planning professions in the 1940s have actively tried to steer as far clear of the concept of 'utopia' as possible. Instead, they have gone to great lengths to highlight the pragmatic, practical and mundane features of the reconstruction plans and proposals put forward at this time, emphasizing the fact that post-war planning was constrained by government legislation and portraying post-war planners as 'socially humane', down-to-earth workers rather than visionary idealists.[3]

Of course, a large part of the problem in this polarized debate is the fact that both sides have adopted a fairly narrow and limited notion of what a 'utopia' entails. Indeed, despite their

differences of opinion over planning issues, they both seem to be unified in viewing utopianism in an overwhelmingly negative light; treating utopias as little more than naive fantasies about other worlds that are, at best, delusionary and escapist: pleasant, but ultimately pointless, amusements.[4] As a result, there has developed what Stefan Muthesius has described as a 'utopia versus reality dichotomy'.[5] This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, it deprives the idea of 'utopia' of any critical value as an analytical concept; transforming what should be a critically engaging notion into little more than a disingenuous rebuke.[6] Second, it overlooks and disregards the manner in which utopian projections – realizable or not – can function as potent aspirational projections through which the desires and ambitions of different social groups can be expressed.[7] This article provides a counterweight to these arguments by restoring the concept of 'utopianism' to the history of planning in the post-war period. Adopting a three-pronged approach that builds on the work of utopian theorists such as Ruth Levitas and Frederic Jameson, it analyses the content, the form and the function of the reconstruction proposals that were put forward by the planning professions in Britain at this time so as to ascertain the extent to which there was any sort of 'utopian impulse' inherent in the planning professions at this time.[8] Ultimately, what it shows is that there was indeed a strong utopian desire amongst post-war planners to work towards and, ultimately, achieve a different, better way of life. Buttressing this optimism, however, was a hard-headed realism about the limits of the planning profession's capabilities and an awareness of the need to solve the planning problems of the day; showing how, in this instance at least, the 'utopian impulse' was able to be channelled into a vision of the future that was at once both idealistic and pragmatic.

The utopian impulse
Part of the problem about writing on the subject of utopianism is that a great deal of confusion still abounds as to what exactly a 'utopia' is. Colloquially, a 'utopia' is still commonly understood to be an idealistic, good, but fictitious, non-existent and, hence, impossible society.[9] It is also often assumed to be rigid in terms of its structure and fixed in respect of its goals. As a result, the focus generally tends to fall on the content (and viability) of the visions that have been projected by utopianist thinkers, rather than the form that these projections have taken or the functions that they have served.[10] Moreover, there has in the past also been a tendency to denigrate utopianism by equating it with totalitarianism, as Frederic Jameson has noted:

Utopia had become a synonym for Stalinism and had come to designate a program which neglected human frailty and original sin, and betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects.[11]

In recent years, however, there has been a noticeable shift in the field of utopian studies from focusing solely on the utopian projections themselves to thinking more critically about the manner in which utopias are created and the functions that they can serve. Ruth Levitas, for instance, has emphasized the sociological aspects of utopianism, arguing that utopias should be seen as 'the expression of the desire for a better way of being' and suggesting that 'utopianism, in the sense of visualizing, hoping for, and working for a better world, is an enduring and essential part of human aspiration and political culture'.[12] Likewise, Lyman Sargent has posited that utopianism is reflective of the basic human desire for 'a better life, for order, unity, and simplicity', whilst Ernst Bloch has even gone so far as to suggest that utopian desires represent a significant element of what it means to be human.[13] Jay Winter too has sought to broaden the field of utopian studies by encouraging historians to pay closer attention to the ideas and visions of, what he has branded, the 'minor utopians'; a group made up of 'people who configured limited and much less sanguinary plans for partial transformation of the world'.[14]

The main benefit of these more holistic approaches to the concept of utopianism is that they help to prevent discussions from descending into (subjective) arguments about what is realistically viable or not and, instead, encourage scholars to think more critically about the methods through which different visions of the future are presented and to better consider what these projections can tell us about the hopes and aspirations of different social groups. This article builds upon these ideas and develops these lines of enquiries by looking in more depth at the content, the form and the functions of the proposals that were put forward by the planning movement in the 1940s. As such, it seeks to move beyond the current 'utopia versus reality dichotomy' in the field and reintegrate the concept of utopianism back into discussions of planning in Britain in the post-war period.

A nation rebuilt

For the most part, utopian theorists agree that one of the key perquisites of any utopian vision is that it must posit and put forward some vision of the future that is, in the eyes of the creator at least, notably better than the present. For instance, according to Darko Suvin, a utopia is:

> The verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community.[15]

Ruth Levitas suggests something similar in her work, suggesting that the 'essence of utopia seems to be desire – the desire for a different, better way of being'.[16]

Certainly, these sorts of aspirations were present in many of the reconstruction plans and proposals that were drawn up in the 1940s. Indeed, in her most recent study of council housing in Britain, Alison Ravetz has suggested that this post-war period represented the 'ultimate episode of utopianism in British council housing'.[17] Such utopian impulses were certainly present in the work of Lewis Mumford, who in one 1943 article written for the Town and Country Planning Association felt moved to declare that:

> Our task is a heavy one . . . it is that of replacing an outworn civilisation . . . utopia can no longer be an unknown land on the other side of the globe; it is rather the land one knows best, re-apportioned, re-shaped, and re-cultivated for permanent human occupation.[18]

Of course, one of the reasons why so much thought was being given to future reconstruction at this time was that the Blitz had reduced so many of Britain's cities to rubble. Moreover, the Blitz not only transformed the idea of 'rebuilding Britain' from a loosely defined and vaguely desirable objective into a coherent necessity, it also provided vast, flattened-out, 'socially empty' spaces in the centres of Britain's main cities upon which planners could project their visions for the future.[19] As David Kynaston puts it: 'if for Keynesians, social reformers and educationalists the war provided unimagined opportunities for influencing the shape of the future, this was even more true for architects and town planners'.[20] Indeed, it would not be overstating things to suggest that a great many planners positively relished the opportunities that the Blitz had provided them with. For instance, one town planner happily declared that, 'as site-clearing agencies they [the Nazi bombers] have shown themselves to be wonderfully effective'.[21] George Cadbury too expressed similar views during the winter of 1941 on a BBC

radio programme devoted to town planning and reconstruction, stating that '[although] the bombs are leveling our old cities, in my view there's got to be a lot more leveling'.[22] Clough Williams-Ellis – the prolific architect and champion of the rural preservation movement – was even more forthright in his views:

> I had to regard the destruction, not with the excitement of the eyewitness or the indignation of the outraged citizen, but with the cool detachment of the professional town planner . . . today [our cities] are all swept away, to the undisguised delight of the more enlightened citizens and of the very able city architect.[23]

The primary reason why those in architectural and town planning professions seem to have shown so little remorse about the damage being done was because, in their eyes at least, Britain's city centres were so outworn that they were in need of 'levelling'. As Williams-Eliis put it: 'we had left so disgracefully few [good] buildings that most of the tissue destroyed was of a morbid growth that we ought ourselves to have cut away long ago'.[24] Eric de Mare´ – an influential architectural photographer and freelance writer – was similarly critical of the state of Britain's cities, declaring that 'the bombs have merely completed an already existing chaos . . . the city is planless, sunless, cramped and entirely unfitted for its purpose'.[25]

In place of this past formless chaos, planners envisioned creating entire new, more satisfactory cityscapes that would be better planned. As Gordon Cherry notes, there was a 'determination for change and for meeting the future with a resolve to sweep away the past'.[26] For instance, Herbert Manzoni – Birmingham's City Surveyor and Engineer from 1935 to 1963 – stated that if the cities of the future were to provide 'a fuller and more purposeful life after the war' then 'every single building' had to be 'coordinated with national and local plans'.[27] Again, this desire to reconstruct and plan on a large scale is something that is very much characteristic of utopian thought. Indeed, as Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out, most utopias – whether they were fictional or not – tend to be territorially defined in the sense that they are self-contained and complete constructs.[28] Frederic Jameson has argued something similar, suggesting that it is precisely this category of 'totality' that presides over all forms of utopian realization, citing 'the Utopian city, the Utopian revolution, the Utopian commune or village, and of course the Utopian text itself' as examples of this 'totalizing impulse'.[29]

Nevertheless, despite the bold rhetoric used, it is important not to overlook the fact that most planners tended to remain very much grounded in terms of their goals and aspirations. As

Paul Addison notes in his history of post-war Britain, many of the planning schemes proposed at this time were actually fairly 'architecturally modest'.30 Part of the reason why this was the case was because, although the positions of both the architectural and especially the town planning professions were strengthened as a result of the Second World War (the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, which promoted a centralized system of planning, being the most significant policy development in this respect), they were still ultimately answerable to the local authorities that employed them.31 Indeed, Peter Mandler has even gone so far as to claim that many planners chose to adopt bold, utopian rhetoric when promoting their plans and proposals so as to compensate for their lack of actual political clout.32 In their research on post-war reconstruction in Plymouth, for example, Essex and Brayshay have shown how the vested interests of local groups had the potential to compromise the visions espoused by those in the planning professions.33 Similarly, Nick Tiratsoo has shown that the extent of the 'New Jerusalemist' influence and achievement has been greatly exaggerated, and that 'important parts of Whitehall' remained wary of 'visionary re-planning'.34

Likewise, the visions that were put forward during the 1940s tended to be very much products of their time. It is important too to appreciate that, despite their often bold rhetoric, those involved in the planning professions during the post-war period still drew from a long evolution of social and political thought that stretched back to before the First World War.35 This is a point that Jeffrey Diefendorf has articulated particularly clearly: 'reconstruction planning often looked back to earlier conceptions of ideal urban forms; it was shaped by pre-existing institutions and laws and was guided by individuals with pre-war experiences'.36 Above all else, there was a keen awareness amongst those in the planning professions that the mistakes that were made after the First World War and during the interwar period could not be repeated. Frederic Osborn, the acting Secretary of the Town and Country Planning Association, was especially conscious of this, stating in one 1948 publication that:

> You've only got to look at where we went wrong in the past to see that that it
> was always because we thought of one important thing and forgot others . . .
> after the last war we thought almost solely of a good family life and forgot about
> industry and community life.37

Mumford too felt that planners had not given enough attention to social factors during the interwar period, claiming that they had been 'too concerned with a set of narrow physical,

technical and economic questions' and had conceived planning 'in a purely mechanical fashion . . . not social and personal terms'.[38]

Particular criticism was directed at the lack of social and communal facilities that had been provided on most suburban housing schemes. As Patrick Abercrombie put it, 'the relationship between housing and community was almost entirely ignored . . . the lack of focal points for the new community life became tragically evident'.[39] Thomas Sharp expressed similar reservations, declaring that 'the problem of providing a great number of urgently needed homes was solved – but solved without regard to making well-balanced communities'.[40] Often this criticism of interwar planning policy would have implicit – and sometimes explicit – undertones of suburban hostility. This was especially the case amongst the younger generation of architects and town planners who were entering the professions at this time, and who did little to disguise their revulsion for the idea of the out-of-town residential estate.[41] In response to these criticisms, the Ministry of Health's Joint Study Group on Town Planning – which was chaired by Thomas Sharp – recommended that all future housing developments should be planned as discrete and self-contained 'neighbourhood units' with sufficient social facilities.[42]

Nevertheless, there was a general acceptance amongst those in the planning profession that, owing to the damage done during the Blitz, there was a pressing need to construct new homes as quickly and as cheaply as possible. As Patrick Abercrombie, perhaps the most influential voice in town planning at this time, stated: 'the improvement of housing conditions is the greatest social need of our time'.[43] Similar views were expressed by E.J. Carter and Ernö Goldfinger in their condensed version of Forshaw and Abercrombie's hugely influential *County of London Plan* (1943): 'a good house, with all the amenities necessary for a full and healthy life, is the primary social need for everyone'.[44] These views were very much in tune with those of local authority officials who, as Nick Bullock has shown, tended to favour pragmatic and utilitarian proposals that offered quick-fix solutions over the 'phlegmatic optimism' of idealists such as J.B. Priestley.[45]

As these sorts of sentiments indicate, therefore, there was an inherently pragmatic and hardheaded strain of thought running throughout the reconstruction proposals of the 1940s. This was especially true when it came to tackling the housing crisis facing Britain at this time, with groups such as the Association of Building Technicians declaring that, 'planning authorities must give increased attention to finding practical solutions [to the housing

shortage] in the interests of health, well-being and efficient output'.[46] As such, the idealism and optimism expressed in the grandiose plans of figures such as Mumford and Abercrombie was always tempered by a matter-of-fact awareness about the dire situation facing Britain in this period, producing a utopia that was simultaneously both idealistic and pragmatic.

Exhibiting the future

In his work on Western utopian traditions, Krishan Kumar has suggested that one of the things that all prospective 'utopians' are obliged to do is to 'present a fully developed and detailed picture of the happy world that is expected to result from the application of particular principles [so that] we can therefore judge of both the plausibility and the desirability of the life so presented'.[47] This obligation to present and make the contents of one's utopia available for public consumption and assessment is something that Robin Wilson has also picked up on in his work on architectural photography. Indeed, as he suggests, the 'way in which [the utopian] act of imagination is structured into language, into a text, into narrative and description' is just as important as the content of the utopian projection itself.[48]

Certainly, those in the planning professions at this time were well aware of the importance of getting their proposals out to as wide an audience as possible and devoted a great deal of time and effort to thinking about how to publicize their plans. Live debates were held over the radio and countless books were published as planners sought to get their ideas across to the British public, with Nicholas Pronay suggesting that, thanks to advances in film and radio, the average citizen was treated to 'visions of a grandiose post-war utopia, which exceeded anything promised during World War One'.[49] Publications such as the *Architectural Review* also sought to stimulate interest in these sorts of issues, producing a special edition issue entitled 'Destruction and Reconstruction' in the summer of 1941 with some 20 pages given over to a series of artistic, black-and-white photographs by John Piper of various bomb-damaged buildings throughout London.[50]

Nevertheless, the most effective and direct way of publicizing new trends and ideas in the planning professions remained the large-scale public exhibition. Such shows were already well established in Britain by this time thanks to the *Daily Mail's* Ideal Homes Exhibition, which was first held at the Olympia Exhibition Centre in 1908. With its heady mix of model homes and futuristic showrooms, the Ideal Homes Exhibition proved to be immensely popular and by the 1930s it was attracting well over one million visitors annually.[51] Bright

and cheerful, it not only provided visitors with practical tips on how to care for their own home, but also afforded them fantastical glimpses into the future, with gadgets such as the electric kettle, vacuum cleaner and electric toaster all making their debut at the show.[52] Indeed, it could be argued that there was something inherently 'utopian' about the way in which the Ideal Home Exhibition afforded visitors the opportunity to escape from the mundane reality of everyday life and experience alternate worlds filled with the possibilities of new and exciting experiences.[53]

As a result of the upheaval caused by the Second World War, however, the Ideal Home Exhibition was temporarily suspended from 1940 to 1946. In its place came a plethora of temporary exhibitions and shows that were organized and funded by the government or other public-spirited bodies. Some of the most notable included: the British Institute of Adult Education's 1941 'Living in Cities' Exhibition, organized by Ralph Tubbs; the Council for Art and Industry's 1942 'Homes to Live in' Exhibition, designed by Elizabeth Denby; and the Council of Industrial Design's 1946 'Britain Can Make It' Exhibition.[54] A number of specifically architectural and town planning-orientated shows were also held during this period. In the summer of 1943, for example, the London County Council (LCC) put on a special exhibition in the London County Hall to showcase Patrick Abercrombie's *County of London Plan* to the public through the use of scaled-down models, diagrams and aerial photographs (Figure 1).[55] They even went so far as to produce a specially edited version of the *Plan* so that children in secondary school would be able to get a glimpse of the London of the future.[56] Elsewhere, there was a great deal of excitement about the potential of film, as one documentary film director explained in the pages of *Town and Country Planning*:

> With its many unique devices of animated models, diagrams and map work
> [and] with its simple yet persuasive powers of explanation . . . the film is the
> most suitable medium for linking the knowledge of the expert with the needs of
> the common people.[57]

Issues related to the post-war reconstruction were also very much to the fore in the *Daily Herald*-sponsored 1946 Modern Homes Exhibition, which featured a new 'system-built' bungalow that had been specifically designed so as to match the criteria laid out in the Ministry of Health's 1944 Dudley Report on the design and layout of council estate houses, and a photographic exhibit of the LCC's new £5 million Loughton Housing Estate.[58] Indeed, even when the Ideal Home Exhibition made its long-awaited return in 1947 there was a much

stronger emphasis on issues related to reconstruction, with both the Ministry of Supply and the Ministry of Health having their own stands.[59]

However, the most prominent and talked-about public exhibition of the post-war period was undoubtedly the 1951 Festival of Britain. Planned and directed by Gerald Barry – a leading Labour politician and one of the founding members of the Political and Economic Planning group – the Festival, which cost over £11 million, brought together the expertise of architects, industrial designers, politicians, artists and scientists in a bid to outline a vision for a modern and socially progressive future.[60] Although the organizers hoped that the Exhibition would provide some light-hearted relief for the war-weary British public, there was, as Becky Conekin has shown, also a strong emphasis on good design, with science and planning evoked as the 'answers to the question of how to build a better Britain'.[61]

Although the futuristic South Bank Site, with its iconic 'Dome of Discovery' and 300 ft high 'Skylon', was undoubtedly the most visually striking feature of the Exhibition, it is worth noting that there were also a number of other less-prominent sites dotted throughout London as well as in a number of other cities around Britain.[62] Chief among these was the Live Architecture Exhibition, which was located in the Poplar district of East London. Formerly a working-class neighbourhood, the area, which had been all but destroyed during the Blitz, was chosen by the Festival's organizers as the site upon which to build a model council estate to 'demonstrate the possibilities inherent in good town planning, architecture, and building'.[63] Named after local Labour politician George Lansbury, the new estate, which was based upon the recommendations that Abercrombie had set forth in the 1943 *County of London Plan*, was one of the largest housing schemes built in this period, providing 1495 desperately needed new dwellings in a 124-acre site in Poplar.[64]

As Simon Gunster has suggested, one of the generic characteristics of utopian narratives is their ability to physically dislocate the reader/viewer from their present and transport them to some 'other' place; providing an escape from 'the mundane reality of everyday life into dreamworlds filled with the possibility of new and exciting experiences'.[65] In some senses, the Live Architecture Exhibition sought to affect a similar sense of dislocation in its visitors. Access to the site was achieved either via road on one of the Festival's specially commissioned shuttle buses or by way of a riverboat service that operated between the Estate and the South Bank and, upon arrival, visitors were presented with a guide map to the site that transformed the spatial reality of the council estate into a narrative story, leading them

from the Festival Enclosure, through the housing on the East Site, past the rebuilt Trinity Church, around the central shopping precinct, past the Ricardo Street Primary School, and then finally back through the terraced housing on the West Site.[66] Structurally, the Live Architecture Exhibition was also very much indebted to the Ideal Homes Exhibition, with the emphasis centred very much on providing visitors with living environment that they could walk around and interact with.[67]

Visually, however, the Lansbury Estate was fairly conservative, providing visitors with a far more sombre glimpse into the future than that provided on the brazenly modernist South Bank Site. Costs were kept to a minimum and most of the buildings were constructed using yellow London stock bricks so that they fitted in with the surrounding area.[68] As a result, the Estate received a fairly lukewarm response from the architectural press.[69] Reyner Banham was especially critical, condemning the designers of the Estate for their cautiousness and lack of imagination.[70] Gordon Stephenson, Professor of Civic Design at Liverpool University, was similarly unimpressed, claiming that too much of the scheme felt as if it had been designed by a committee only after 'endless discussions'.[71]

Criticisms of this sort did not seem to unduly worry the Exhibition's organizers who were more concerned with providing members of the public with a vision of the future that was functional, practical and, above all, attainable. As the guidebook to the Live Architecture Exhibition explained, 'what architecture can do for us in the future is presented in the South Bank Exhibition; here, at Lansbury, can be seen what is being done today'.[72] Nothing illustrates this commitment to presenting a utilitarian vision of the future better than the 'Lansbury Show House'. Designed by Geoffrey Jellicoe – a well-established architect and President of the Landscape Institute – the terraced three-bedroom 'Show House' was located on the Eastern Site and was designed so as to mirror as closely as possible the style of an actual working-class dwelling. Serviced by the North Thames Gas Board and fully furnished with items from the Council of Industrial Design's 'Utility' range, it allowed visitors to get a glimpse of what it would really be like to live on a council estate. As W.S. Crawford, the public relations officer for the site, explained: 'the aim [is] to demonstrate in life-size and in permanent form . . . how a typical Lansbury family can achieve pleasant home conditions within the budget at its disposal'.[73] Indeed, so keen were the Exhibition's designers to make the 'Show House' as realistic as possible that they even conjured up a fictional family to inhabit the show home: the father (Bill) was imagined to be a 40-year-old dockworker on a wage of £10–12 a week, who, having apparently served with the Navy during the war, was

keen to 'see everything shipshape and Bristol fashion'; his wife (Mary) was 35 years old, had worked in the services during the war and 'understood good housekeeping'; and their four children (Jack, Jane, Jill and Baby Tom) were 13, 8, 6 and 1 years old, respectively.[74]

In many ways, then, the Live Architecture Exhibition was the perfect symbol of the planning profession's 'utopian' aspirations in this period. Functionally, it was clearly utopian in the sense that it was a physical embodiment of an alternate future that could be viewed and assessed by members of the public. Likewise, the manner in which the Exhibition's organizers actively sought to dislocate visitors from their present-day milieu and transport them through a carefully choreographed public spectacle can also be seen to have distinctly utopian traits. Nevertheless, the Live Architecture Exhibition did not present visitors with anything like the same sort of fantastical and ultramodern visions that were on display at the South Bank Site. Instead, visitors to Lansbury were treated to a much more utilitarian and functional spectacle where the emphasis was much more on providing practical and workable solutions to the planning issues of the present; a utopianism that was, once again, heavily pragmatic at its core.

A vision worth fighting for

As a number of utopian theorists have stressed, one of the things that distinguishes utopian writing from pure fantasy is the fact that, very often, utopias have a functional role in the sense that they are produced in response to problems and issues that have arisen in the author's present. Thus, according to Frederic Jameson:

> a utopia must be motivated: it must respond to specific dilemmas and offer to solve fundamental social problems to which the Utopian believes himself to hold the key . . . and this must be a solution so obvious and self-explanatory that every reasonable person will grasp it'.[75]

Krishan Kumar has made a similar point in his writings on the topic, suggesting that utopias typically seek to engage with the present:

> From the very beginning, from More's own rational and restrained vision in his Utopia, utopia has displayed a certain sobriety, a certain wish to walk in step with current realities. It is as if it has wanted deliberately to distance itself from the wilder fancies of the popular imagination . . . it has wanted to remain within

the realm of the possible – possible according to the human and social materials to hand . . . it accepts the psychological and sociological realities of human society.[76]

As mentioned previously, this desire to provide workable solutions to the problems of the present was something that was very much evident in the reconstruction proposals advocated by the planning professions during the 1940s. Dealing with the housing crisis facing Britain at this time and restoring a sense of community to inner-city areas were two of the most pressing issues that the planning professions sought to provide solutions to, but there were many other contemporary concerns that similarly worried planners in this period. Chief among these was the falling birth rate of the period, which sparked fears about the effects that a declining and ageing population might have on Britain's military and industrial strength.[77] Many planners were convinced that through better foresight in planning this potential crisis could be averted, with one speaker at the Town and Country Planning Association's National Conference in 1943 declaring that 'any policy designed to restore the birth-rate must include the provision for British families of dwellings and towns suitable for children and favourable to family life'.[78] Mumford too was insistent on this point, stating that:

> [W]e must think not simply in terms of industrial rehabilitation but of biological survival ... the first consideration of town planning must be to provide an environment which will not be hostile to biological survival [but] to create one which . . . by sympathetic magic will encourage the woman of child bearing age the impulse to bear.[79]

Yet alongside the fact that they offered potentially workable solutions to the problems of the present, there was also a sense amongst many planners that the reconstruction proposals of the 1940s fulfilled a number of other publically beneficial roles simply by virtue of the fact that, structurally, they provided visions of different futures and other possible worlds. In particular, there seems to have been an awareness that the schemes outlined in the reconstruction proposals could, and frequently did, provide some much needed optimism and positivity to a war-weary population.[80] Eric de Maré´ clearly believed that the British people deserved some sort of relief to compensate for all their sufferings, claiming that: 'we need a new vision, a new and vivid dream that cuts across the Hitler nightmare. A Britain rebuilt must form a vital part of that vision'.[81] Frederic Osborn was similarly effusive in the foreword he wrote to the Picture Post's special issue on post-war planning, declaring that there was a

need to try to 'outline a fairer, pleasanter, happier, more beautiful Britain than our own'.[82] William Robson also emphasized the therapeutic and practical benefits of planning for the future:

> [T]here is a moral and psychological need for something to which the nation can look forward to, an ideal to sustain it through the days of privation, endurance, sacrifice and suffering . . . and every vision requires a plan . . . without vision there can be no planning of any sort.[83]

On top of this, there was also a sense that by providing the public with an insight into what their towns and cities might look like in the future, the reconstruction proposals of the 1940s also served to help reinforce the government's democratic credentials – an issue that, given the British state's public hostility to fascism, was especially pertinent at this time. Andrew Saint has even gone so far as to suggest that the planning professions at this time tended to embody the sections of society most committed to a more egalitarian, social democratic future.[84] Whether or not this was the case, planners certainly seem to have been mindful of the need to publicly emphasize and promote the virtues of democratic principles, as the following passage indicates: 'people cannot be effectively made to want things outside of their experience . . . planning [should be] essentially democratic, not oligarchic . . . the modern version of oligarchy is Fascism'.[85]

Closely tied in with this desire to be seen to be promoting democracy, then, was an acute awareness of the need to be seen to be acting in accordance with the wishes and aspirations of the general public. As Osborn noted: 'You can't leave it to the experts. We shall never get good planning except on a democratic basis. Planning always goes wrong if people plan for others'.[86] As such, it was increasingly accepted that planners had an obligation to help educate the public, as one speaker at the 1944 Town and Country Planning Association's National Conference noted: 'it is our duty to educate and instruct the public so that they can appreciate now the possibilities and effects of planning legislations'.[87] Ralph Tubbs, the man responsible for the design of the iconic 'Dome of Discovery' at the 1951 Festival of Britain, was of a similar mind-set: '[we] must help the public realise the opportunities and grasp the implications of reconstruction [and] bring to their notice those human values and aspirations that can be embodied in a well-planned country'.[88]

From a practical perspective, the reconstruction plans and proposals put forward in this period played a crucial role in this respect as they were able bring the visions that planners

had for the future to life in an immediate and accessible way. At the Live Architecture Exhibition, for instance, the organizers erected a large red and white striped 'Town Planning Pavilion' – replete with images and models of future planning schemes – so as to educate the public about the principles of good town planning. An equally large 'Building Research Pavilion', in which there was a specially designed 'Gremlin Grange' that demonstrated through a series of full-size models all the things that could go wrong in buildings when scientific principles were not adhered to, was also erected on the site.[89] The LCC were similarly keen to educate the public about the principles of town planning and in 1944 they produced a special edition of the *County of London Plan* for use in schools, informing pupils that

> It would be an excellent thing if you and the other members of your class undertook a cooperative attempt at making a Plan for your own neighbourhood . . . it is extremely important that you should begin to take an informed interest in the affairs of your own district, because good citizenship begins at home. If you are a good citizen of your own neighbourhood you are more likely to become a good citizen of London, of Britain and of the world as a whole.[90]

As this section has indicated, therefore, the reconstruction plans and proposals of the 1940s were, despite their utopian tone and content, very much grounded in the realities of the period. Not only did they attempt to provide solutions to the problems and issues of the day; they also tried to make a positive and direct impact on people's lives by providing positive and informative visions that contrasted drastically with the grim realities of wartime Britain. Moreover, as Nick Bullock has noted, debates over reconstruction not only encouraged members of the public to 'think actively and constructively' about the future; they also proved to be significant in encouraging local authorities, like the LCC, to experiment and innovate during the 1940s.[91] In other words, then, the reconstruction proposals put forwards by planners in the post-war period were, thanks in no small part to their idealistic rhetoric, very much of relevance to the day-to-day functioning of British society in the 1940s; suggesting once again that this was a utopianism that was, at its core, simultaneously idealistic and pragmatic.

Conclusion

For too long, debates over planning in post-war Britain have revolved around a narrowly conceived 'utopia versus reality' dichotomy: on one side have been those who have sought to portray the 1940s as a period in which planners became caught up in naive and impractical fantasies about the future; on the other have been those who have, in response to these claims and in an effort to underplay the idealism of the planning professions, strongly emphasizing the pragmatism and ordinariness of these plans. This has led to a slightly farcical situation whereby planners from this period can either be presented as deluded, aloof dreamers or as hard-headed rationalists with little thought for the future.

This paper has endeavoured to tell a different story. Rather than treating utopianism and pragmatism as two mutually exclusive concepts, it has built upon recent work by utopian theorists and adopted a more nuanced and holistic approach to the concept of 'utopia'; looking at the content, the form and the function of the reconstruction proposals of the post-war period. In short, it has tried to move beyond the misguided notion that just because something is utopian it must therefore be inherently naive, impossible or misguided. Instead, it has shown that more often than not the visions for reconstruction that were put forward by the planning professions in books and public exhibitions during the post-war period were simultaneously both idealistic and pragmatic. Indeed, they not only combined a clear sense of optimism with an acute awareness of the grim realities of wartime Britain; they also sought to pragmatically use this idealism to positively impact upon public morale and to provide solutions to the problems of the day. It is, I would argue, because of these reasons that it is both necessary and desirable to reintegrate the concept of 'utopianism' back into debates over planning and reconstruction in the post-war period.

Notes

1. Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (London: University of California Press, 2002), xvi.
2. A point made in Nick Tiratsoo, Junichi Hasegawa, Tony Mason and Takao Matsumura, *Urban Reconstruction in Britain and Japan 1945–1955: Dreams, Plans and Realities* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2000), 1–3. For more texts that adopt this sort of critical stance, see Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (London: Routledge, 2001), 104; Nicholas Pronay, 'The Land of Promise: The Projection of Peace Aims in Britain', in *Film and Radio Propaganda in World War II*, ed. K.R.M. Short (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 53–4; Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 96–8; David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945–48: A World to Build* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 21.

3. Jeffry M. Diefendorf, ed., *Rebuilding Europe's Bombed Cities* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 5; Nick Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics: Coventry, 1945–60* (London: Routledge, 1990), 102. See also Paul Addison, *Now the War is Over: A Social History of Britain 1945–51* (London: BBC, 1985), 70–5.

4. See Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 1–7.

5. Muthesius, *The Postwar University: Utopianist Campus and College* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 5–6.

6. As Jay Winter has recently noted, there is 'a pressing need to 'cleanse' the term and reclaim it as an analytical category after the 'age of extremes'. See Jay Winter, 'Minor Utopias' (paper presented at the Utopian Spaces of British Literature and Culture, 1890–1945 conference, English Department, University of Oxford, September 18, 2009). See also Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), xi.

7. For more on this tendency, see Frank Mort, 'Fantasies of Metropolitan Life: Planning London in the 1940s', *Journal of British Studies* 43, no.1 (2004): 124. 8. See Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*; Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*; Zygmunt Bauman, 'Utopia With No Topos', *History of the Human Sciences* 16, no. 1 (2003): 11–25.

9. Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 2.

10. See Tony Widdicombe, 'Utopia, Historiography, and the Paradox of the Ever-Present', *Rethinking History* 13, no. 3 (2009): 287–93.

11. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*.

12. Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, xiv and 8.

13. Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 8; Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3–4.

14. Winter, *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the 20th Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 3.

15. Suvin, 'Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia: Some Historical Semantics, Some Genology, a Proposal, and a Plea', *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 6 (1973): 132, no. 2: 121–45.

16. Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 209.

17. Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*.

18. Mumford, *The Social Foundations of Post-war Building, Rebuilding Britain Series, no. 9* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), 17.

19. For more on the concept of 'socially empty' spaces, see Michael Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870–1900* (London: Haymarket, 2009), 184–209.

20. Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, 29. See also J.B. Cullingworth, *Town and Country Planning in England and Wales* (London, 1967), 23–31; Julian Hasegawa, 'The Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction in 1940s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History* 10, no. 2 (1999): 138.

21. W.A. Robson, *The War and the Planning Outlook, Rebuilding Britain Series 4* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), 9.

22. F.J. Osborn, ed., *Making Plans: Based on the BBC Series of Discussions* (London: Todd Publishing, 1943), 10.

23. Williams-Ellis, *Plan for Living: The Architect's Part, Rebuilding Britain Series, no. 5* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), 18–19.

24. *Ibid.*, 19.

25. de Maré, *Britain Rebuilt* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1942), 13.

26. Cherry, *Town Planning in Britain since 1900: The Rise and Fall of the Planning Ideal* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 92.

27. Frederick J. Osborn, ed., *Making Plans: Based on the BBC Series of Discussions* (London: Todd Publishing, 1943), 73.

28. Bauman, 'Utopia with No Topos', 12.

29. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 5.

30. Addison, *Now the War is Over*, 72.

31. For more on these debates, see J.B. Cullingworth, *Environmental Planning, Volume 1: Reconstruction and Land-Use Planning 1939–1947* (London: HMSO, 1975), 2–5; Hasegawa, 'The Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction', 158–60.

32. Mandler, 'New Towns for Old: The Fate of the Town Centre', in *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964*, ed. Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters (London: Rivers ORam, 1998), 209–10.

33. Stephen Essex and Mark Brayshay, 'Vision, Vested Interest and Pragmatism: Who Re-made Britain's Blitzed Cities?', *Planning Perspectives* 22 (October 2007), 417–41.

34. Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics*.

35. John Stevenson, 'Planners Moon? The Second World War and the Planning Movement', in *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World*, ed. H.L. Smith (Manchester: University Press, 1986), 59.

36. Diefendorf, *Rebuilding Europe's Bombed Cities*.

37. Osborn, *Making Plans*, 33. See also Ronald R. Martin, *Everyday Economics* (London: English Universities Press, 1948), 17.

38. Mumford, *The Social Foundations*, 24–5.

39. John H. Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie, *County of London Plan* (London: HMSO, 1944), 2.

40. Osborn, *Making Plans*, 40.

41. For the generational debates that divided the architectural and planning professions in this period, see Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, 31; Peter Carolin, 'Sense, Sensibility and Tower Blocks: The Swedish Influence on Post-war Housing in Britain', *Twentieth Century Architecture: Housing the Twentieth Century Nation 9* (2008): 107–8; L.C.B. Seaman, *Post-Victorian Britain, 1902–1951* (London: Routledge, 1989), 456–7.

42. MoH, Dudley Committee's Joint Study Group, 'The Relationship of Housing to Town Planning' (1944), 1. National Archives (NA)/HLG 37/65.

43. Abercrombie, 'The Housing Centre Hand-Out' (14 October, 1941). Mass Observation Archive (MO), Tape Collection: Part 4: Reel 50, TC2/2/B.

44. Carter and Goldfinger, eds., *The County of London Plan Explained* (London: Penguin, 1945), 21.

45. Bullock, 'Ideals, Priorities and Harsh Realities: Reconstruction and the LCC, 1945–51', *Planning Perspectives* 9, no. 1 (1994): 89.

46. Association of Building Technicians, *Housing Problems: The Present Position* (London: ABT Publications, 1944), 5.

47. Kumar, 'Aspects of the Western Utopian Tradition', *History of the Human Sciences* 16, no. 1 (2003): 70.

48. Wilson, 'At the Limits of Genre: Architectural Photography and Utopic Criticism', *Journal of Architecture* 10, no. 3 (2005): 268.

49. Pronay, 'The Land of Promise'.

50. Piper, 'The Architecture of Destruction', *Architectural Review* 90, no. 535 (July 1941): 21–45.

51. Deborah S. Ryan, *The Ideal Home Through the Twentieth Century* (London: Hazar, 1997), 12–13.

52. Leighton, *The 1950s Home*, 7.

53. See A.J. Clarke, 'The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration', in *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, ed. D. Miller (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 26–9; B. Highmore, 'Richard Hamilton at the Ideal Home Exhibition of 1958: Gallery for a Collector of Brutalist and Tachiste Art', *Art History* 30, no. 5 (2007): 273–5.

54. See 'Report on Homes to Live in Exhibition' (1942). MO, Tape Collection, Part 5: Reel 76, TC1/8/J.

55. E. Hulton, 'The Britain of Tomorrow', *Picture Post* 14, no. 1 (January 3, 1942), 26–8.

56. LCC, *Replanning the County of London: A Brief Account of the County of London Plan for Use in Schools* (London: McCorquodale, 1944), 24.

57. P. Rotha, 'Films for Planning', *Town and Country Planning* 9, no. 35 (1941), 87–9.

58. 'Press Release for the Modern Homes Exhibition' (20 March, 1946). MO, Tape Collection, Part 5: Reel 77, TC1/9/A.

59. Ryan, *The Ideal Home*, 91–3.

60. A. Forty, 'Festival Politics', in *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951*, eds. M. Banham and B. Hillier (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 30–5; 'Festival of Britain: A News Chronicle Souvenir in Pictures' (May, 1951). LMA, 4061/C/03/006.

61. B. Conekin, *The Autobiography of a Nation: The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester: University Press, 2003), 4.

62. P. Rennie, *Festival of Britain 1951* (Michigan: Antique Collectors Club, 2007), 63–5.

63. B. Taylor, *The Festival of Britain: The Official Book* (London: HMSO, 1951), 34.

64. LCC, 'Progress Section: Housing Handbook' (December 31, 1952), 8. LMA, HSG/GEN/2/28.

65. Gunster, '"On the Road to Nowhere": Utopian Themes in Contemporary Auto Advertising', *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 29, nos. 2–3 (2007): 211–12.

66. 'Lansbury Estate: Stepney & Poplar' (1948). LMA, LCC/HSG/PP/64; Ian Cox, 'The South Bank Exhibition: A Guide To the Story it Tells' (1951), 93. LMA, GLC/AR/G/22/5, File 17:Part 1; 'A Visitors Guidebook to the 1951 Festival' (1951), 13. LMA, 4061/C/03/005.

67. Tiratsoo et al., *Urban Reconstruction*, 29.

68. 'Lansbury Estate', *Architectural Review* 109 (March, 1951), 651.

69. See F.J. Osborn, 'Lansbury Estate', *Town and Country Planning* (June 1951), 286.

70. R. Banham, 'The Style: Flimsy...Effeminate?', in *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951*, ed. M. Banham and B. Hillier (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 191.

71. J. Stephenson, 'Lansbury, Poplar', *The Journal of the RIBA*, 58 (1951): 379–82.

72. H.M.G. Dunnett, ed., *Guide to the Exhibition of Architecture, Town Planning, and Building Research* (London: HMSO, 1951), 5. LMA, 4061/C/03.

73. Festival Committee, 'Memorandum on Festival of Britain 1951: The Lansbury Show House' (May 1, 1951), 1. LMA, 4061/C/03/007.

74. *Ibid.*, 1–4.

75. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 11.

76. Kumar, 'Aspects of the Western Utopian Tradition', 64.

77. P.M. Thane, 'The Debate on the Declining Birth Rate in Britain: The "Menace" of an Ageing Population', *Continuity and Change* 5, no. 2 (1990): 245–67.

78. D. Tyerman, ed., *Ways and Means of Rebuilding* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), 50.

79. Mumford, *The Social Foundations*, 34; Mumford, *The Plan of London County, Rebuilding Britain Series no. 12* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), 33. See also W.L. Waide, 'The Report and Statutory Planning', *Town and Country Planning* 8, no. 30 (1940), 20; Richard M. Titmuss, 'Planning and the Birth-Rate', *Town and Country Planning* 9, no. 35 (1941), 85.

80. See Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, 21.

81. de Mare´, *Britain Rebuilt*, 11.

82. Osborn, 'A Plan for Britain', *Picture Post*, January 4, 1941, 4.

83. Robson, *The War and the Planning Outlook*, 7–8.

84. Saint, 'The New Towns', in *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain, Volume 9: Modern Britain*, ed. B. Ford (Cambridge: University Press, 1992), 147.

85. Festival Committee, 'Memorandum on Planning Exhibitions from RIBA in Relation to CEMA Exhibitions' (October 7, 1941). MO, Tape Collection, Part 5: Reel 76, TC1/8/G.

86. Osborn, *Making Plans*, 36.

87. Brian Bliss, ed., *The New Planning: Redevelopment and Relocation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), 41.

88. Tubbs, 'Memorandum on Living in Cities Exhibition' (May 1, 1941). MO, Tape Collection, Part 4: Reel 49, TC2/1/P.

89. H.M.G. Dunnett, ed., *Guide to the Exhibition of Architecture, Town Planning, and Building Research* (London: HMSO, 1951), 9–10. LMA, 4061/C/03.

90. LCC, *Replanning the County of London*.

91. Bullock, 'Ideals, Priorities and Harsh Realities', 87–101. For a contemporary perspective on the role that a utopian perspective can have in planning, see Dennis Hardy, 'Utopian Ideas and the Planning of London', *Planning Perspectives* 20, no. 1 (January 2005), 35, 46.