Daniel Black advocates for holistic, long-term thinking in housing policy, rather than a rush to build new homes for short-term gains

Housing, health and economic growth: can we negotiate towards a healthier future?

The government's bullish house-building reforms are understandable yet worrying. Without long term health as the lodestar, we will get more identikit sprawl, more traffic, lifeless lawns, and few, if any, amenities.

Is it any wonder we are a nation of 'Nimbys' (Not in my back yard)? New housing is needed, but this quantity-at-any-cost approach will burden a healthcare system that is already on its knees.

Arguably, it is not the fault of the government or the housebuilders. They are trying to get decent houses built, as best they can, within a system locked into outdated modes of delivery, while in a financial and social media straitjacket. So, what is to be done? How do we turn Nimbys into 'Yimbys' (Yes in my back yard), and do it quickly?

Hugh Ellis, the TCPA Director of Policy, called recently for a return to the ideals enshrined by Ebeneezer Howard in the Garden City Principles.[1] This raises two critical areas of consideration; value and values and risk and negotiation.

Will the government's ambitious house-building targets lead to yet more urban sprawl?

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Value and values

When Garden Cities were being promoted at the end of the 19th century, the UK was awash with money and largesse. Merchants were the Silicon Valley tycoons of their day (the former exploited India's natural resources, the latter are exploiting the world's data and attention, creating geopolitical turmoil in the process). Today, the UK is certainly not poor, yet, according to our measure of progress, gross domestic product (GDP), we are not rich enough, and this drive towards growth is dictating housing policy. How do we get out of this race to the bottom?

There is no simple answer. The world's economic and socio-political systems are vast and complex, which is why uncertainty is fundamental to the consideration of whole systems.[2] National housing policy may not be as complex as global macro-economics, but it is complex, nonetheless. In the TRUUD research programme (Tackling the Root causes Upstream of Unhealthy Urban Development), we identified 27 problem areas and 50 areas of potential intervention.[3] Fundamental problems we identified included inherent short-termism, and health being marginalised.[4] We made seven key recommendations.[5]

1. **Prioritise health (prevention) at the top of government.**
2. **Elevate quality alongside quantity.**
3. **Examine the role of law in determining urban health outcomes.**
4. **Study and improve public-private partnership.**
5. **Value planetary health in ways other than quantitively.**
6. **Negotiate complex trade-offs.**
7. **Make digital technology serve us, rather than the other way around.**

Our evidence suggests that government acting to protect our health would be supported by the private sector if it was strategically coherent and fair. However, achieving this paradigm shift in priorities is easier said than done, and complex trade-offs are inevitable. Rapid change is needed, and those people and

companies whose practices need to shift will require support in this transition. For example, in another research project, we estimated the costs and benefits of reducing food waste, and found, unsurprisingly, that doing this is bad for (food) business.[6] Yet there will be just as many winners too in these new systems of delivery, and we will all, ultimately, be better off.

This echoes one of the other key points in Ellis's article: Schumpeter's theory of 'creative destruction'. From the spinning jenny to the dot-com bubble, technological revolutions are replete with cycles of boom and bust. Yet the Luddites and miners didn't break the looms and strike because they were technophobes. They had lost their jobs and their communities.

People are not anti-technology or anti-housing, but they are pro-health, pro-nature and pro-fairness

Take the Garden City Principle of land value capture. One of the push-backs from a regional director of a volume house-builder was: Why tax land? Why not tax the Big Tech companies who are avoiding tax?[7] It's a fair question. Ellis is therefore right to bring AI into this discussion. People are not anti-technology or anti-housing, but they are pro-health, pro-nature and pro-fairness. This is about values.

Risk and negotiation

There's a lot going on here. Thankfully, we're not starting from scratch. Back in the 1990s, following several major threats to public health, including the BSE and Brent Spa crises, the Royal Society convened a group of leading thinkers to discuss a new approach to managing risk.[8] The main debate was between the technocrats, who felt that risk can and should be quantified and managed/reduced, and the sociologists, who felt that risk is far more political and negotiable. An uneasy rapprochement was forged, but the debate continues.[9] Their discussions featured frequent references to cultural theory, especially as applied to risk. This was pioneered in the 1970s by the British

anthropologist, Mary Douglas. A core concept of this theory was 'grid-group' framing, which enables us to distil, arguably, all the complexity of human nature and society into something manageable: the four 'myths' of human nature, and of nature (see Table 1). We are likely to have some of each myth within each of us. For example, I generally support autonomous, market-based solutions as the most efficient way to progress (individualist), but also want state intervention to secure our environment and future (hierarchist), as I do worry it's leading to collapse, and sooner than many think (nature can break down – egalitarian, hierarchist, fatalist).

Table 1: Grid-group cultural theory re-framed[10]

	Myth of human nature (how people behave, and think others should)	Myth of nature (how they think nature behaves)
Hierarchist	Top-down (i.e. state) intervention and control	Self-rectifying up to a point; in need of some management to prevent breakdown
Individualist	Autonomy (i.e. market-based), survival of the fittest	It's fine; it'll look after itself
Egalitarian	Grass-roots, equal distribution	Precious; prone to breakdown
Fatalist	Passive, leaving it all up to chance	Impossible to determine one way or another

If we apply cultural theory to the government's current approach to housing delivery, it is facilitating (hierarchist) market-led delivery to kick-start business-as-usual (individualist) assuming nature will look after itself. There is also a general powerlessness at the prospect of AI (fatalist), and the concern of many that we are all headed for disaster (egalitarian). This not only allows simplification, it engenders respect for others' points of view: there is no right or wrong, just different beliefs, values and world views. It recognises plurality, rather than suggesting there is only one right answer.

Cultural theory has been developed over time to help with negotiation and reconciliation – a perennial challenge for government, who need to decide every day how to balance the demands of the 'haves' with the 'have-nots'. It steers away from overly simplistic or 'elegant' solutions to complex problems, and more towards practical or 'clumsy' solutions.[11] It's been used in a range of different areas, such as engineering projects and insurance risk.

I wonder whether a cultural theory-based approach to stakeholder negotiation might be used, via citizens' assemblies, in the development of strategic planning and housing policy, or to help different groups work with the new Environmental Outcomes reporting.[12] Might we use it with planning jargon? For example, current government policy is clearly welcoming the Yimbys yet steamrolling the Nimbys. Cultural theorists might ask us to look for and involve the 'Yiobys' and 'Niobys' ('yes/not in others' back yards) too (see Table 2).

Table 2: Possible urban planning myths of (human) nature

Are these the urban planning myths of (human) nature?			
Nimby	Not in my back yard	Not anti-development per se, but perhaps anti-social, and possibly pro-nature?	Where would these fit in the grid-group framing? Answers on a postcard..
Yimby	Yes, in my back yard	Pro-development, pro-social, pro-nature?	
Yioby "yobbies"	Yes, in others' back yard	Pro-development, yet anti-social, anti-nature?	
Nioby "nobbies"	Not in others' back yard	Anti-development, pro-nature?	

Healthy Homes

Many quotes are attributed to Einstein, one of which is 'make things as simple as possible, but not simpler'. This could apply here. The problems are complex, and we must work with that, but there are solutions.

Daniel Black is Programme Director of TRUUD (Tackling the Root causes Upstream of Unhealthy Urban Development) and Specialist in Urban Development for Planetary Health, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol. All views expressed are personal.

Notes

1 'The NPPF and Ebenezer Howard's inconvenient legacy'. Blog. TCPA, 26 Feb. 2025. https://www.tcpa.org.uk/the-nppf-and-ebenezer-howards-inconvenient-legacy/

2 *Introduction to systems thinking for civil servants.* Government Office for Science, 12 Jan. 2023. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/systems-thinking-for-civil-servants/introduction

3 *Phase 1 Report.* TRUUD, Feb. 2024. https://truud.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TRUUD-Phase-1-Report.pdf

4 D Black, G Bates and R Callway et al: 'Short-termism in urban development: The commercial determinants of planetary health'. *Earth System Governance*, Vol. 22, Dec. 2024, 100220. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2024.100220

5 'We need to overcome short-termism if we are to make healthy places to live'. Blog. TRUUD, 17 Oct. 2024. https://truud.ac.uk/overcome-short-termism/

6 D Black, T Wei, et al: 'Testing Food Waste Reduction Targets: Integrating Transition Scenarios with Macro-Valuation in an Urban Living Lab'. *Sustainability*, 2023, Vol. 15 (7), 6004. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15076004

7 D Black, P Pilkington et al: 'Overcoming Systemic Barriers Preventing Healthy Urban Development in the UK'. *Journal of Urban Health*, 2021, Vol. 98, 415–427. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11524-021-00537-y

8 J Ashworth: *Science, Policy and Risk*. Royal Society, 1997

9 A similar debate has been ongoing in economics (see note 7, above)

10 M Thompson: *Cultural Theory*. Routledge, 1990

11 M Verwij and M Thompson: *Clumsy Solutions for a Complex World. Governance, Politics and Plural Perceptions*. Palgrave, 2006. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9780230624887

12 D Black and E Kirton-Darling: 'Environmental outcomes reporting – clearly inadequate, but does opportunity knock?' *Town & Country Planning*, Nov-Dec. 2023, see: https://truud.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Environmental-outcomes-reporting-TCPA-Nov-23.pdf