BLUE SKIES OR PIE IN THE SKY?

Grand designs
Masterplanners is big business, but with many schemes never making it off the drawing board, is it time to rein in the wilder ideas? By David Thame

Too many masterplans, they allege, exist simply to be 'launched'. And once they've created a splash in the media they can be – and frequently are – forgotten. Rightly so, say the sceptics, because the great scheme was nothing but an expensive PR exercise.

The most exciting of masterplanners is Will Alsop. His schemes still, however, remain pictures distributed in the hope that they will be realised in the future. Alsop and his team have, however, won the £100m move for the East London Olympic site. For many, this is the chance to prove that masterplanners are as good as they say they are.

London 2012 Olympics, as well as providing world-class sporting facilities, will have a profound impact on much of the surrounding area.

"Mundane realities"
Alsop insists that good masterplanning involves "showing yourself free of mundane realities and attempting to find an inspirational agenda. An essential part of this is a kind of 'grasping the dream' in which ordinary people are engaged in their aspirations and hopes."

"To some people's surprise, the people have higher aspirations and dreams than many so-called urbanists. If you engage people and listen to what they are saying, you have a solid place to start."

In recent years, Alsop has been involved in masterplanning projects such as the Pondicherry Masterplan in India, the Masterplan for the redevelopment of the Olympic Park in London, and the Masterplan for the redevelopment of the Barbican Centre in London.

Alsop's projects have been characterised by their use of bold, innovative designs and their focus on creating vibrant, sustainable communities.

"We are about trying to create value and there's more value in what people aspire to than in considering market forces from day one. After all, a lot of mass housing is provided in a self-consciously market-led way – and a lot of people who buy it have no choice, so it becomes self-hypnotising," says Alsop, who sees in much masterplanning a peculiar and provocative opportunity to break out of this vicious cycle.

"You have to throw yourself free of the market – only then can you have a chance of achieving some new vision, and the kind of world that could be different. One of the things that worries me about the way other people do their masterplanning is that we've lost the power of theory on urban strategies."

"But at the same time, we must find something public and supportable, and you can develop and apply some theories, but you really do have to engage with the public."

Alsop acknowledges that some of his competitors start out with dreams, but with hard market realities. However, he isn't impressed. "Some people do the other way around – they start with the market. Of course you have to conform to the tastes of deliverability, but if you do it too soon it clouds ambition and imagination," he declares.

London-based GMO Architects, which has been masterplanning an area of London's Docklands, likes to think that it too has some imagination. And the firm, like Alsop, thinks there is plenty to learn from Tuscan hill towns, arguing that the city's layout provides an excellent model for the integration of diverse developments.

But GMO's Albert Brearley says that market realities, not dreams, have to come first.

Publicly stunt
"The masterplan as publicity stunt does have its uses," says Brearley, "but time and again we have seen wonderful masterplans and it's the companies that's proved difficult.""It's realities, not dreams, that come first for us. We start by always doing a market assessment. It's fantastic to dream, and we do it, but with projects..."
Poets' corner

And where Alsop quotes Keats, Brierley quotes JG Ballard's novel *Millennium People* in which the residents of an upmarket gated community at Chelsea Marina begin a violent insurrection.

"If you don't tackle issues like land values, you end up with a danger that the linkages and overlaps between different areas become broken, and areas become segregated because it's too easy for the chattering classes to split themselves off from the low-value areas. Masterplans should be about reinforcing the linkages and overlaps, and that requires a close understanding of things like land values," says Brierley.

Unfortunately, he says, in a tough market for masterplans some clients are told what they want to hear, and not what they ought to know.

"We look at some masterplans, and at some from the 1960s and 1970s that were implemented, and sometimes maybe it's best if some masterplans remain just that - plans."

**Raising expectations**

Neil Cooper, head of planning and development at Colliers CRE, sees virtues in both the Alsop and Brierley approaches.

"Masterplans can raise expectations in totally unfounded ways. It's unfair to blame the Olympics, but we have there a very impressive image-creating plan about the Lea Valley and how it will look, but on schemes like that you have to go through a huge technical exercise to look at the costs and the real demand. Of course you can create a market, but you must also have some underlying and rigorous testing of assumptions," he says.

The problem arises, thinks Cooper, if you let architects have their head.

"Quite often, people are appointed to do masterplans who come from the architectural creative vision-making side of property - which is fine - but you have to put them with people who have the necessary technical expertise," he says.

"A bad masterplan vanishes without a trace very quickly - developments just don't proceed - and that's the real test of a masterplan. If it doesn't lead immediately to development then it's got problems."

For Cooper, the danger is that those who commission masterplans - mostly local councils - might not have the best possible motives: "There's always a political appetite for short-term solutions and if a council can say it has a masterplan then it looks like they're doing something. Better still, if it takes a long time to deliver then the council can say at least they were trying.

"What annoys is the sense that something can be magic'd into being immediately. In parts of the UK economic demand is limited and land values are low and if masterplanners don't take that into account then it's not doing the local community a favour."