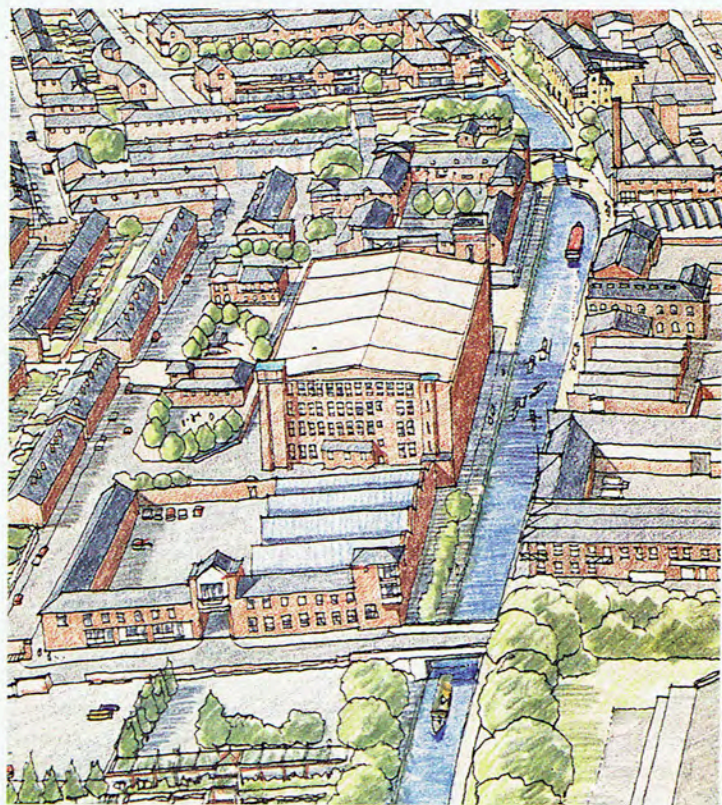


# Power to the people

*At last, planners, architects and developers are taking the wishes of the local community into account.*

*Nick Wates describes how "action planning" events are revolutionising the building process*



TEN YEARS AGO, A TEAM OF EIGHT architects, planners and economists descended on an inner-city district of Southampton. They spent a long weekend discussing how best to improve the place, along with a variety of members of the local community.

They held public meetings, talked to local traders, made drawings, gave interviews to journalists and stayed up all night producing a report with recommendations for action. Many of these proposals – including roofing over a local market, creating a new piazza, building new housing and using one lane of a bleak dual carriageway as car parking – have

since happened, despite having been regarded by officials as unrealistic. "The event reinforced the ideas that the locals had, and helped us to talk to the professionals," says Maureen Read, a former resident of the area. "This enabled us to develop a working relationship with the council – and there were some good results."

That long weekend was Britain's first "action planning" event. Ten years later, the approach is becoming commonplace. A powerful group of urban design and community regeneration organisations (including English Partnerships, the Urban Villages Group, the Urban Design Group, the Civic Trust and the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture) are promoting action

planning as a way of breathing new life into the current statutory planning system.

At least 30 full-scale action planning events have now taken place in the UK, creating new visions for problem housing estates, city centres, new settlements and redundant industrial areas. The events have been hosted by developers, housing associations, local authorities and landowners including the Duchy of Cornwall. Recently, British consultants have started to export the idea, especially to Eastern Europe.

The process has evolved considerably since the pioneering project in Southampton. However, the basic approach, which was originally imported from the United States, remains the same: the organisation of carefully structured events at which all sections of the community work closely with independent specialists from relevant disciplines.

In contrast to the arms-length, bureaucratic and adversarial methods of statutory planning,

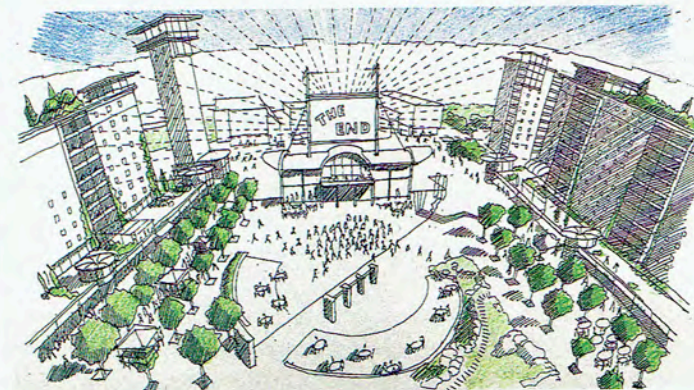
action planning allows local communities to be involved in mapping out their future, working with professionals and the developers. "A properly designed action planning event creates a unique chemistry of activity and energy, bringing together all the potential players working towards a common goal, producing new and sometimes unexpected results," says architect John Thompson, who specialises in organising action planning events.

A typical event starts on a Thursday, after months of careful preparation and publicity. An independent, multi-disciplinary team of specialists arrives and is briefed by local community leaders, planners and politicians before

touring the area by bus or on foot. Then, in the evening, there will be a launch event – often a public meeting – where the process is fully explained and issues are aired.

Friday and Saturday are devoted to a series of intensive workshops. Local people and specialists work together in small groups, defining problems and devising solutions with the aid of models and drawings. On Sunday, the team synthesises all the resulting ideas into firm proposals for action. These are presented to a press conference and public meeting on the Monday evening. This tight and public deadline ensures results. The team then departs, leaving a local group to take the proposals forward over the coming months and years.

The scepticism that invariably greets new approaches is gradually overcome as people experience the magnetic atmosphere of an action planning event and the benefits that can result. "I came as a cynic but left exhilarated,"



*This page, top, plans for the future: discussions with residents will help to shape the fate of Cecilienplatz in Hellersdorf, a suburb of former East Berlin. Proposals put forward by representatives of the local community will transform the present blocks of bleak flats in the area, left, into a leafy urban garden, below. In England, Rochdale is undergoing a similar metamorphosis. Members of the community, centre, met with planners and architects to plan the regeneration of a derelict industrial canalside. Opposite page, ideas for the canal's renewal*

says Mike Galloway, the director of a Glasgow regeneration project, after taking part in an event in London's Docklands. "I have not had so much fun as a professional for some time. It recharged my batteries," he adds. Local resident Justin Wilson was similarly convinced: "The weekend showed that a hands-on approach to consultation really works."

One influential convert is David Taylor, the chief executive of English Partnerships, who took part in a five-day community planning weekend to explore the future of the notorious Hulme housing estate in Manchester. "I know from my own experience that action planning can create a shared vision for regeneration,

and bring innovative solutions from the people who have to live with the effects," he says. "It also instils a sense of ownership, ensuring that the outcome is more sustainable." English Partnerships is now part of a group that is coordinated by The Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, whose principal aim is to promote the process as something on which any community can embark. This group is pushing for action planning to be incorporated into the normal planning process.

Lee Mallet, editor of *Building Design*, sums up the group's philosophy after taking part in an action planning event in London. "If more towns, villages and cities held regular, cathartic

events which examined what was happening to their citizens' habitat... through a process which mixed professional, public and private interests," writes Mallett, "we would have a much better country – one where the rejection of the architect would not be automatic, and the dead hand of professional planning would be removed." □

*Action Planning: how to use planning weekends and urban design action teams to improve your environment, edited by Nick Wates, is published by The Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, 14 Gloucester Gate, Regents Park, London NW1 4HG (0171-916 7380), price £10*