

# PLANNING WITHOUT PLANNERS

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**Bridge House, Ambleside**, as sculpted by Lilliput Lane. Bridge House, possibly the most photographed building in the Lake District though it has plenty of competition from the scenery, was built over a stream and, contrary to its name, does not work as a bridge as it only has a door on one side. Its form comes from its builder wanting to avoid land tax, a miniature example of spatial opportunism generating form.

Under the combined political weight of cuts and localism, the planning system is experiencing its biggest upheaval since the current model came into being in 1947. Long-established rulebooks will be torn up and planning departments are cutting back their services, and the result is likely to be a withdrawal, at least at the scale of local government, from the overseeing of the built environment. All this is taking place amidst much 'power to the people'-style rhetoric from the government and, conversely, a general suspicion amongst everyone else that big business, rather than the little guy, will benefit the most from the situation.

Even before the coalition government got into its stride, the clues were there that something was about to change. In 2009, the London Borough of Barnet launched a stripped-back service model unofficially dubbed 'easyCouncil' in tribute to the budget airline model that inspired it. An antecedent to the cuts, 'easyCouncil' would charge a premium for anything but the most basic of council services and, in a direct lift from the airlines, charge for priority planning applications. 'We never said this was about rolling back the frontiers of the state,' council leader Mike Freer told the *Guardian* back in 2010, 'This is about making the public sector work efficiently and eventually getting out of the way.'<sup>1</sup> At roughly the same time, rules for Permitted Development (what can be built without needing planning permission) were radically rewritten with the intention of freeing up local authority planning departments to focus on larger developments: a dramatic refocusing of the planner's gaze.<sup>2</sup>

To misquote John Turner, planning is a verb. The question of who plans, for whom and for what end, is a valuable one, and one rarely asked since the heady days of 1947, when the Town and Country Planning Act, which still forms the basis of our planning system, was drawn up. This act, within living memory, cemented the idea that local authorities were the people who 'plan' for everyone else, an idea that remains intact despite the grafted-on techniques of public consultation and engagement. But the history of planning, beyond the confines of the 1947 Act, is full of examples which poke at this cement: just as it is possible to 'architect' without being an architect, it is possible to 'plan' without being a planner: Commerce can plan, as evidenced by the 1909 Burnham Plan for Chicago and Wacker's Manual. Religion can plan, as evidenced by the designated area between public and private in sharia law where development is left to individual decency. The unexpected can plan, as proven when the outdated ideas of the Garden City movement found new relevance via the private car, garden furniture and the out-of-town superstore. Economic cunning can plan, as the immense buildings that duck and dive around London view management frameworks make evident. And finally, pure human need can plan, as shown by the tightly-knit 'squatter hamlet' recorded in Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise*.<sup>3</sup>

The truth behind all these examples though is that they're the result of a collaboration between different interests and different outlooks: sometimes well scripted, and at other times unrehearsed, opportunist or piratical. They give the lie to the idea that planning is always 'done to us' by the public sector working alone, or by the simple chess game of private interest versus public authority. Whatever happens in the wake of the current localist shift (corporate free-for-all, grinding inertia, community empowerment etc.) the underlying change looks likely to be less planners as understood by the 1947 act. The largely unwritten history of popular planning tells us that, for designers as well as the public at large, this may be an opportunity as well as a threat.

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Mulholland, 'Mr easyCouncil defends his local government model', *The Guardian*, 03.02.2011  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/feb/03/mike-freer-easycouncil-interview>> [Accessed 18.05.2011]

<sup>2</sup> Var. (David Knight, Finn Williams, Europa et al.), *SUB-PLAN: A Guide to Permitted Development* (London: 2009)

<sup>3</sup> Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939)