

Responsive urban fringe management

Thames Chase Community Forest and the defining of urban fringe

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The following paragraphs put forward some tentative discussion of the nature of the urban fringe, intended mainly to highlight the complexities of the areas around towns which must be addressed by policy-makers. The work derives from ongoing research carried out by the authors into the nature, definition and management of urban fringe areas. A central theme of this work is that the urban fringe can be modelled as the geographical manifestation of socio-economic and physical reflexive links between urban and rural areas.

The growth of cities has been accompanied by a variety of problems. These have occurred at various time scales and situations in all zones of the urban landscape. Urban environments are complex both in terms of their internal structure and in their relationship with their wider setting. Consequently their planning and design is by no means a simple process. Recognising the evolving characteristics of urban fringe environments and taking their dynamic nature into account as a policy consideration is a necessary adjunct to the effective management of more established urban centres.

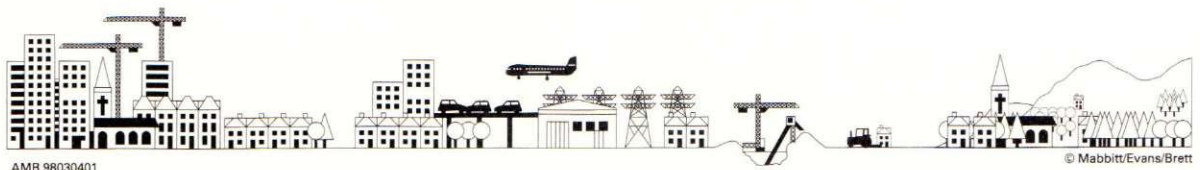
However, although problems investigated here are spatially located where town meets country, they nevertheless have ramifications throughout the urban whole. In the UK stringent development control policies have limited the spatial extent of the built fabric of towns and cities.¹ Green belts have attempted to retain an essentially open character around many urban areas. Until recently, policies of agricultural primacy have dictated land use patterns although demands for urban infrastructure have also played a major role.² Within this context, pressures generated over time by urban areas have moulded urban fringe landscapes to a distinct character.

This paper discusses some characteristics of peripheral urban environments as they have evolved in the UK, with special reference to the East London/South Essex Fringe (see figure 1). It goes on to discuss the effectiveness of an important policy tool which addresses the problematic aspects of this peripherality: the *Thames Chase Community Forest* (TCCF), and to recommend broad strategies by which management of the urban fringe can be made more responsive to the needs and aspiration of local populations.

Interest in the Management of the Urban Fringe

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The Community Forest Initiative



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Figure 1: location map showing Thames Chase boundary and main settlements

Urban fringe: the landscape context

The East London/South Essex fringe displays many built features which are typical of urban fringe environments. Housing, of various types, is a key land use. Various factors impinge upon the nature and extent of housing development in fringe areas. Settlement morphology reflects social and economic change over time. In South Ockendon, (see figure 1) the Greater London Council's effort to relocate families from inner city areas, and to provide a workforce for a developing local economy resulted in large council estates characterised by modernistic styles (plate 1). The contrasting neo-vernacular character of the owner occupied developments of the 80s and 90s reflects changing priorities: an attractive amenity location adds value to properties (plate 2). Much evidence of owner personalisation of the previously public sector housing can be seen. Green belt legislation aims to control the extent of development: expansion of existing settlements and infilling is the preferred mode of growth. Projected figures for increased housing demand, suggest that the fringe is an area which is likely to be exploited further for housing, despite the possible adverse effects that have been voiced by those advocating a compact city strategy.³

The recreational use of the fringe also leaves its mark on the built environment. This is most obvious in cases of formal recreation (plate 3) but even in informal recreation a certain amount of built development is required to service the leisure activities (plate 4). This inevitably raises questions about the contextual appropriateness of the architectural style, scale, and materials of particular types of new built form. Again, planning controls play an important role. Green Belt legislation, the primary policy tool for managing built development in the South Essex/East London fringe has an ambiguous effect. Activities such as golf are broadly seen as acceptable, due to the essentially open nature of the sites upon which they are practised. Other more intensive built developments are generally considered inappropriate to Green Belt areas. However golf courses can include significant built structures. Informal recreation, on the other hand tends to comprise little built development, nevertheless, there is some associated infrastructure: the more successful the activity is at attracting people from a broad catchment, the more pressure exists to provide functions such as car parking, toilets and visitor centres.



Plate 1. GLC housing, South Ockendon



Plate 2. Neo-vernacular housing, South Ockendon



Plate 3. Built development associated with formal recreation: Brentwood Park



Plate 4. Built development associated with informal recreation: Thorndon country park

Mineral extraction, another key urban fringe land-use, also has an ambiguous effect (plates 5 and 6). Generally it is negatively perceived, both in terms of the environmental destruction caused by active mineral extraction sites, and because of the necessary plant for extractive operations. This includes large numbers of heavy goods vehicles, which contribute to noise and atmospheric pollution, and have implications for the capacity and safety of the local road transport network. In addition, on-site processing plant can be of a very large scale, although its semi-permanent nature supports its frequent classification as an appropriately 'open' land use in terms of green belt policy. However, in a landscape such as South Essex with no really outstanding natural features, the aesthetic effect (for better or for worse) of former mineral extraction sites can be significant. Reclaimed mineral sites can provide an amenity resource, informal or formal recreational uses (e.g. water sports activities, country parks), and in some cases can increase the diversity of wildlife habitats. However, re-use of this kind is often accompanied by some form of built development.

In the urban fringe there are many major transport corridors in close proximity. In the South Essex fringe, major roads provide both access to London (e.g. A13) and a means of by-passing it (e.g. M25 orbital motorway). In addition, roads form communication routes within the fringe itself and link to the wider regional transport infrastructure. They have obvious implications for industrial, commercial and residential location. However, their negative effects are equally obvious: atmospheric and noise pollution, fragmentation of land holdings, and an impact on both the visual and habitat quality of the landscape.

A range of agricultural activities represent the greatest land-use coverage in the fringe. However, many factors have made contemporary fringe landscapes a far cry from conventional images of agricultural rusticity. Multiple pressures for the use of fringe land (housing built development, recreation, infrastructure, industry, minerals etc.) have affected agricultural management practices.⁴ Farm enterprises have become increasingly marginalised, fragmented, diversified and suffer from a range of problems associated with its peri-urban location. These include degradation of land from mineral and land filling operations, sterilisation of land by built development, and site-

specific access problems, such as trespass and vandalism. As a result alternative farming methods, such as intensive pig units and poultry farms have developed. Once again, there is a significant impact on the built character of the fringe landscape.

Therefore, the morphogenesis of urban fringe landscapes is a reflection of complex social, economic and cultural factors which arise as the interaction between urban centres and their rural surroundings. In other words, the urban fringe is heterogeneous in terms of both its characteristic features and their causal influences. This heterogeneity, does not necessarily imply a marked local distinctiveness of character: landscapes and built development at the fringe of many towns and cities in the UK share many of the same negatively valued characteristics outlined above. However, the urban fringe is clearly more than a spatial zone. In order to gain a more complete understanding, it is necessary to consider the communities (in the broadest sense) who occupy and use urban fringe environments.

Urban fringe: the community context

Given the variety of groups who have an interest in the urban fringe an array of values have become attached to fringe environments. On the one hand they may be valued for positive characteristics which are generally associated with the more 'rural' or open parts of it (amenity space, aesthetic quality, habitat value). On the other, they can be negatively perceived due, for example, to environmental degradation and the social and economic deprivation which tends to be associated with the more 'urban' or built-up parts of the fringe. This equating of rural with good and urban with bad is, of course, a simplification, and there are many other ways in which the value of the fringe varies from group to group as well as from place to place.

Figure 2 identifies the major competing communities within the UK urban fringe context. Put simply, land is a scarce resource, and in the fringe pressures on land can be particularly pronounced, whether for informal recreation, housing, agriculture, mineral extraction or to service the nearby urban infrastructure. Therefore the constant shifts in the balance of power between communities over time and space plus the results of strategic alliances between communities are manifested in the evolving landscape of urban fringe areas.



Plate 5. Active mineral working: Rainham



Plate 6. Reclaimed mineral working: Eastbrookend Country Park

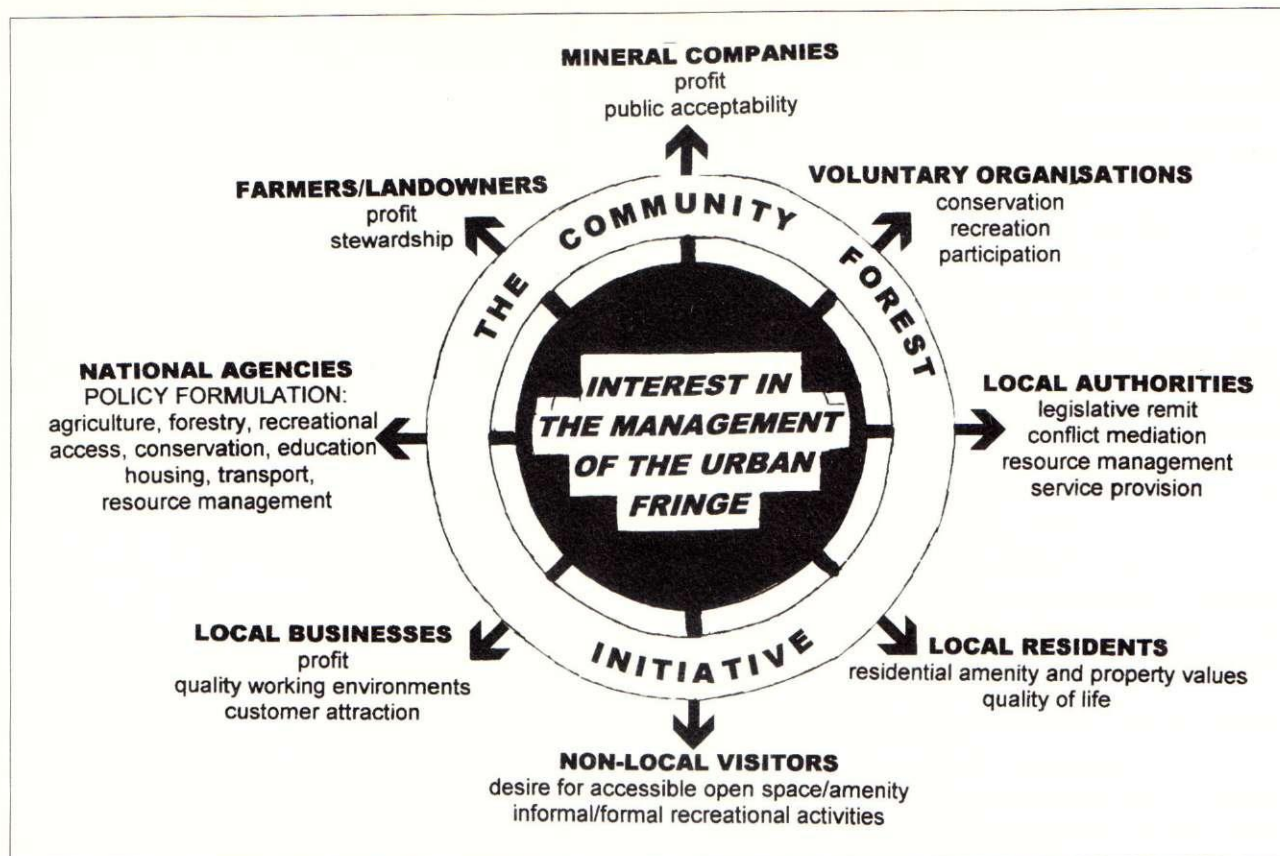


Figure 2. Communities of the urban fringe

Given the diversity of rural and urban landscapes, and the variety of communities with an interest in them, there are in fact a number of conceptual fringes whose definition and scope depends on the interaction between value and landscape characteristic. This will affect the effectiveness of management schemes. For example policy aimed at addressing problems of peripherality manifested as urban fringe issues may be either protective (in terms of conserving valued landscapes) or progressive (in terms of promoting economic development) according to physical and social context.

The urban fringe needs to be considered as a dynamic resource both physically and in terms of the communities shaping change within it. In an idealised situation, therefore, policy should reflect variations in values that change with community and with landscape. If this is the ideal, what is the reality?

Managing the urban fringe: the example of Thames Chase Community Forest

The Community Forest initiative seeks to address the negative characteristics of urban fringe landscapes and to enhance environments which exhibit peripheral characteristics in both physical and socio-economic/cultural terms. The twelve Community Forests which comprise the national initiative represent the first co-ordinated multi-agency response to countering urban fringe decline in the UK. The initiative is based upon the identification and satisfaction of multiple objectives. These include landscape and environmental enhancement, recreational provision habitat conservation and environmental education. The concept advocates multi-purpose forestry as the catalyst for achieving a range of beneficial changes.

The key management scheme aimed at addressing the East London/South Essex fringe, is the Thames Chase Community Forest⁵ (see figure 1). Introduced in 1989, it is the smallest of the UK Community Forests (38 square miles) and falls within the administrative influence of five local authorities. These comprise two London Boroughs (Havering and Barking & Dagenham), two Essex Districts (Brentwood and Thurrock) and Essex County Council. Although the instigators and key funders of the national initiative are the countryside commission and forestry commission, the local authorities, who work in partnership with a locally based project team, have a pivotal role in strategy development and implementation. Community involvement at all levels of the decision making process is seen as critical to the successful implementation of the initiative.

However, eight years on, the Thames Chase project team are encountering increasing difficulties in achieving its planned targets. These targets are not simply based on physical objectives (for example woodland creation) but also upon achieving representative community inputs into the plan process. Thus although the name and broad aims of the initiative suggest a bottom up orientation it is still dominated by top down structures, initiated and overseen by the professional sector. Such an approach may overemphasize the values held by dominant social groupings, at the expense of the less clearly articulated needs of the wider range of communities with an interest in the management of local environments.

Primarily, there is a difficulty in defining 'urban fringe'. The TCCF is a clearly delineated policy area. However, it is debatable whether this policy area and the characteristics which define it as a policy tool have significant relevance for the various communities within and using it. In terms of sustainability, the aim of involving local communities in order to engender a sense of responsibility for schemes and to develop projects linked to local needs and desires is clearly laudable. However, this begs the question: 'of whom does the local community consist?' In the context of the TCCF it has tended to be taken as being all people who live within the specified area: a *territorial community*⁶. However *communities of interest* (i.e. those who share common values and perceptions) are not necessarily spatially restricted to the policy area itself. Responsive management of the urban

fringe therefore requires a recognition in policy of the diversity of communities of interest within and beyond the fringe: the motivations and perceptions of urban fringe residents may well be different to those of urban fringe users from other areas. Such a range of motivations and perceptions must be recognised at an early stage in the preparation and implementation of integrated strategies for fringe management.

Negative images of the fringe can also have an impact on perceptions of the urban area itself, since the fringe, with its concentration of transport corridors is the first point of contact for visitors. In the area covered by the TCCF a spiral of decline marked by a general apathy towards improvement initiatives is evident and this can be exacerbated by the non-cohesive nature of the local population. For the TCCF to break this spiral of decline wider partnerships between national, local and community agencies are essential. The physical improvement of urban fringe environments with more representative levels of local involvement is an important stimulus to this process. Most urban fringe initiatives implicitly or explicitly aim to improve the transition between urban and rural environments in terms of physical characteristics and the TCCF is no exception. For example, a stated aim of the TCCF is to provide identifiable physical links between town and country. In theory, green routes, based on existing physical elements of towns (such as canals, river courses and disused railways) linked with existing cycle paths and footpaths serve not only to link urban and rural areas, but make urban areas themselves greener. The development of a network of greenways affords aesthetic, recreational and ecological benefits. For example, planting associated with the creation of greenways could be designed to complement (or screen) urban architecture, to provide natural surroundings for children's play areas or to link urban 'islands' of biodiversity. The benefits of woodland and 'natural' environments both within towns and at the urban fringe will be maximised if they form part of an interconnected network of footpaths, cycleways and recreational features from the urban core to the rural hinterland⁷. The key issue is the linking and creation of valued areas. This could lessen the impact of the urban fringe as a barrier between town and country in addition to improving conditions within the fringe itself. However, as with other environmental

enhancement projects, the lack of cohesive community structures militates against successful achievement of these goals and where community initiatives exist, they may be unrepresentative of large portions of the fringe population.

A more responsive approach would take more account of the close relationships that exists between community and their environment. Essentially, urban fringe user communities are not spatially restricted to the urban fringe. Equally, the landscape characteristics of urban fringe areas are shaped by factors that operate both beyond and inside the fringe zone. For a more responsive process of urban fringe management, these socio-economic and physical links need to be carefully considered in policy formulation and supported by multidisciplinary research.

Conclusions

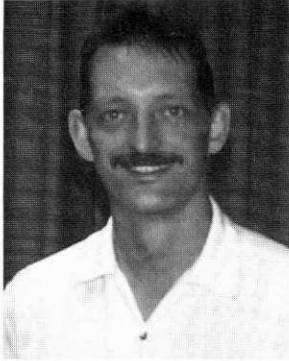
Towns cannot be considered as tightly defined, and self contained urban areas in an equally distinct rural setting. The edges of towns often merge gradually with the countryside, and even where the physical edge of the town is sharply delimited, there are strong and reflexive social and economic ties between the town and its surrounding area. On the one hand, areas around towns provide various resources vital to the functioning of the urban area. On the other, urban areas contain most of the potential direct and indirect users of the urban fringe resources. The value accorded to these resources (recreational, mineral, agricultural, infrastructural etc.) may not necessarily be easily quantifiable. Studies of the nature of the urban fringe have tended to view the urban area it surrounds in the abstract, as an economic and social model with no physical characteristics of its own. Whilst this view of the city as a 'social container' exerting pressures and demands upon outlying areas is a useful conceptual tool, reality is more complex. The physical form of towns has a bearing on how urban fringe activities integrate with urban activities. For example, the provision of greenways which play a crucial role in integrating the activities of town and country will be shaped by the morphological nature of the

urban area, and conversely, will play a part in modifying the appearance and character of the townscape. The fact that greenways are effectively public space gives their impact on the townscape a special relevance.

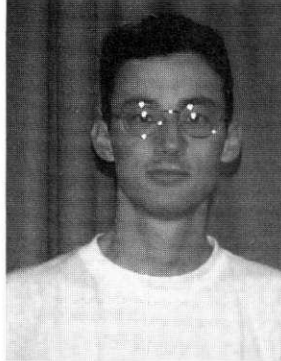
Within the planning system, there is a tendency towards a conceptual separation of town and countryside. In the past, initiatives have tended to be specifically urban or specifically rural. One of the strengths of the Community Forest concept is that it does not imply that the town and the country are totally separate physical and social systems. Past experience suggests that pre-requisite to the fair and effective management of fringe areas is to recognise the reflexivity of the formal and functional relationships between urban and rural areas.

An holistic approach which recognises the importance of these social, economic and physical links between town, fringe and countryside is vital to the effectiveness and sustainability of urban fringe management schemes. Where such links are not taken into account, the effectiveness of initiatives will be diminished. Through such management, the resources traditionally associated with 'the countryside' can be brought into towns for the benefit of urban populations. Conversely, the accessibility of traditionally rural resources can be improved for urban dwellers. Rather than conceptually and physically partitioning towns from their surroundings, the aim is to create a situation where characteristics sought out in the country also extend into towns, and where townspeople can gain access to the potential benefits of the multiple resources of the countryside around towns.

Clearly, the community forest initiative has made significant steps towards achieving this aim. However there is still scope for a more responsive and sustainable approach to the management of urban fringe areas. In the UK context, this implies increased popular participation at all stages of the development cycle, and a significant change of emphasis towards a more proactive 'bottom up' approach in the design and implementation of management strategies.



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Notes

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