

Free the design spirit

The cost of land and tight Government control stop us from determining what's built around us. It's high time this came to an end, says **Don Riley**

WHEN I ARRIVED in London from New Zealand 40 years ago Britain was still recovering from the Second World War. There was a huge amount of low priced property to buy, to rent and to improve.

My experience with renovating residential and commercial property since then has proved to me that rationing still applies when it comes to property! All property, including commercial, but especially residential property, is wretchedly expensive and in many places and types in short supply. The UK is some hundreds of billions of pounds away from a balanced free market supply of housing.

The real problem in achieving a market where demand for affordable housing and property is fed, is the cost of land, which can be up to 80 per cent of a property's value. It is absurd that economists and building societies do not unbundle land costs when analysing affordability and house prices. The pressure on the supply of land for building development is itself bound up with the planning process, which has a fierce control over how land is used.

A new book published by the Institute of Economic Affairs lifts the lid on the catastrophe of the Whitehall and local government grip on the use of our land. In *Liberating the Land*, Dr Mark Pennington



Kaleidoscope: instead of restricting modern imagination to museums, 'Brit Art' creativity could cover the land

argues that the key to communities reinventing their dynamism and destiny lies in regaining their rights over land use. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 nationalised development rights, and the old Ministry of Agriculture took away most farming land-use decisions during the 1980s and 1990s.

'Market failure' arguments are used to support land-use planning. However, in his radical attack on the present regime, Pennington sees these arguments as misguided. Planners, even if altruistic, could never gather and interpret the sufficient information necessary to run an efficient land-use planning system. In practice, planners also have their own interests and are subject to pressure from special interest groups.

Fundamental change is required to tackle an over-centralised system, with too little experimentation and property information, and inappropriate incentive structures. Private covenants, deed restrictions and the establishment of proprietary communities are the way forward.

If local communities held the development rights for the land around them individual property owners would be able to share these rights through a local recreation and amenity company. The boundary of the

company would be as restricted or extended as the common interests of its members.

Within cities, for example, some adjacent streets might have enough members to share an interest in a housing development. In a rural area a parish boundary could be more appropriate. Then, instead of awful schemes submitted by nationwide developers and approved by sycophantic local councils or daft Whitehall schemes such as prefabs on publicly-owned land, as suggested by Lord Falconer, we could have a kaleidoscope of schemes, proposed by locals who wanted what they liked, where they liked.

Such a reform would be like the Tate Modern being emptied of its pretensions, and then all its modernity, imagination and riotous colour let loose on the countryside. While some areas may still elect for traditional housing, at least instead of poverty there would be real choice. Instead of shape and colour considered so outrageous it's labelled "Brit Art", and walled up in the former Bankside Power Station, we would have the inspiration of this energy released into countless local visions of contemporary buildings.

And all this would happen without Whitehall and its mandarins laundering their masters' favourite schemes for political, rather than sound economic reasons. **L&L**

Illustration: Lucy Glover