

Max Lock, Middlesbrough, and a forgotten tradition in British post-war planning

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In the spring of 1944, the young architect and planner Max Lock accepted a commission from the local council to re-plan Middlesbrough, an iron and steel town of 130,000 people in the North East of England. His intention, he explained, was to work in a new way, planning *with* the inhabitants rather than *for* them, thus transforming what had previously been a largely technical discipline into 'a democratic process'. This paper examines how Lock functioned in Middlesbrough, and comments on various aspects of his final recommendations, before turning to discuss what impact he had on the subsequent development of British planning. Our conclusion is that though Lock's insights and achievements were substantial, they were then for the most part 'forgotten' during the 1950s and 1960s, and in a brief coda, we speculate as to why this was so.

Introduction

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Max Lock and his ideas

Born in 1909 to middle-class parents, Max Lock studied and then taught at the Architectural Association in the 1920s and 1930s, meanwhile starting a private practice. He was a Quaker and had marked liberal sympathies, both in terms of architecture and politics. In the later 1930s, he joined the Modern Architecture Research Group (MARS), undertook a tour of Scandinavia to learn about new advances in housing policy, and became an independent councilor in his hometown of Watford. When the Second World War broke out, Lock, as a conscientious objector, found life hard, but in the end, as interest in reconstruction blossomed, he was employed by Leverhulme to undertake a survey of the badly bombed city of Hull.¹ Always an energetic proselytiser, Lock now began promoting what he saw as no less than a wholly new method of planning.

Lock believed that planners had lost their way in the inter-war years. The humanistic tradition, associated with Geddes, Branford and Mumford had been forgotten. Instead, vested interests had been allowed to dominate, and define the realm of possibilities in terms of their own narrow ends. As a result, planning had been reduced to the merely 'cosmetic', while sprawl and congestion had spread across the country unchecked. Yet, as Lock saw it, this phase was now, in turn, being superceded. The experience of the Blitz had radicalised people's ideas and provided the physical space for a fresh start. In this context, the pioneers' agenda was once again becoming relevant. For the younger generation, the urgent challenge was to see how it might be developed and then applied.²

Lock's starting point was the axiom that planning had necessarily to involve extensive dialogue with ordinary people. The citizens of a place, he insisted, were 'the planner's clients' and 'must be consulted in the same way as the clients of an architect are consulted'.³ In order to achieve this, he believed, planners needed to break with the 'cosmetic' and develop the 'diagnostic'. He explained:

This entails a revolutionary change in two directions. In the use of the scientific analytical method, on the one hand, and in the study of sociology and human problems, on the other. These two together form as it were the parallel tracks of a permanent way, upon which alone the vehicle of planning can traverse the crowded and difficult ground of contemporary life. Mere factual analysis can mean nothing apart from its complement, human sympathy and the sympathetic investigation of vital human needs which constitute the energising live-rail of this track. Investigation by itself is not enough. It must see and know its goal. It must be linked to a long-term objective – an integrated environment.⁴

In practical terms, Lock concluded, this meant that the planner could no longer work as a narrowly technical practitioner, but needed to interact with other disciplines, most importantly, he stressed, 'the science of sociology'.⁵

Planning Middlesbrough

After moving to Middlesbrough in the spring of 1944, Lock rented a two-storied suburban house, and began recruiting helpers. After a few weeks he had assembled a formidable group, which included the geographer A. E. Smailes, the sociologist Ruth Glass, four planners, and 18 assistants (some part-time). Lock then turned to collecting raw material. The team scoured printed sources and also did much fieldwork. Lock himself, together with the other planners, surveyed the town's housing, open spaces, transport and public utilities; Smailes examined the economy; while Glass completed an ambitious investigation of neighbourhood structure, health and education services, and the retail sector. Much of this work involved recording fairly predictable metrics. But the team was also able to tap into more subjective dimensions, because, fortuitously, the government's Wartime Social Survey was persuaded to organise a complementary exercise in opinion research, distributing detailed questionnaires to a randomly selected group, drawn from every twenty-third household, of 1,387 housewives and 1,209 other adults.⁶

Then came a fairly fevered period of analysis. Lock and his team transferred much of the raw data onto transparent maps, and learnt much from overlaying them in combination.⁷ By the late summer of 1945, the plan was finished and in the hands of the council. Three months later, it was formally accepted 'in principle' and became official policy.⁸ The final version, complete with numerous maps and tables, was published in 1947, alongside a book edited by Glass that summarised much of the fieldwork.⁹

A 'peoples' plan'?

Lock aimed to construct a 'peoples' plan'. To what extent did he succeed? Two observations are pertinent. The first concerns popular interest in planning. Lock had always believed that it was part of the planner's job to cultivate enthusiasm and debate, and as a result, he took a great deal of care in Middlesbrough to ensure that communication with ordinary people remained a priority.¹⁰ His team opened an office in the town centre; addressed many meetings with residents and community groups; gave interviews to the press and radio; produced 'penny pamphlets' on their main ideas, together with a popular version of the final plan; built models for display in local venues; and collaborated with the council on a major exhibition.¹¹ Not all of these initiatives were equally successful. But it appears that Lock did at least partly achieve his goal. Most visitors to Middlesbrough directly before and after this time tended to view it as generally introverted, without a vibrant civic culture. Priestley labeled it a 'dismal town', whose chief passions were beer and football.¹² Others concurred.¹³ Yet during 1944 and 1945, there was without doubt a pronounced upsurge in public engagement. Some 22,000 people, perhaps one-sixth of the population, visited the exhibition; an array of inhabitants, from industrialists to schoolchildren, took part in discussions about planning issues; and the plan itself was, for some months, a major topic of local conversation. Outsiders registered the change, with one informed observer, for example, reporting that the plan had 'aroused a storm of protest and interest'.¹⁴ Given that some other planning schemes of this period provoked only marginal and fleeting comment from the population at large, this, in itself, was certainly a significant achievement.

Second, there is no doubt that Lock took what ordinary people wanted extremely seriously, and built their preferences into his final recommendations wherever possible, even at the expense of ignoring the conventional wisdom that was circulating amongst his peers. Two examples are germane. The first concerns neighbourhood units.¹⁵ These were in vogue at the time, and so might have been expected to appear at the heart of the Middlesbrough plan. But in fact Lock took a rather more original approach, based upon a real respect for the evidence. The starting point was Glass's enquiry into neighbourhood structure. Much planning discourse tended to treat the phenomenon of working-class community rather uncritically, perhaps through a rosy haze. Glass punctured some illusions. She demonstrated that 'integrated' neighbourhoods were both numerically rather rare and closely associated with 'negative factors' like 'poverty and geographical isolation'. As such, they were hardly models for emulation. What planners should focus on, Glass argued, were places that better reflected how society was currently developing. The reality, she believed, was that the more affluent people became, the more they wanted 'to pick and choose' – to look for, and perhaps pursue, social and institutional contacts *outside* their immediate street or area. Accordingly, the planner's task, she concluded, was to design residential areas in a more flexible and holistic manner. She explained:

Convenient access to institutions is essential, but standards of convenience vary for different groups and for different types of services. There will inevitably be a good deal of criss-cross movement and residential cells should, therefore, be closely related to each other. The pattern of urban areas should express and facilitate the coherence of groups of neighbourhoods: it should not be split up by a number of small subdivisions.¹⁶

Of course, Lock might well have resisted this logic, but he did not. His plan certainly provided local services for the less mobile, and sited them at regular intervals. But it also acknowledged that 'the vast majority of healthy adolescents and adults' required 'easy access both to the centre of the town and to other neighbourhoods', and drew the apposite planning lessons, for example, that clubs and facilities should be sited *between* communities rather than within them. This was, as Lock underlined, very different from 'the somewhat romantic concept of the neighbourhood unit as a self-contained cell modelled on the lines of the village green'.¹⁷

Lock's recommendations on suburbs were equally sensitive to popular priorities. The Wartime Social Survey had exhaustively analysed local peoples' feelings about housing and planning, and discovered a deep yearning for the suburban lifestyle. An emphatic 90 per cent of 'housewives', 92 per cent of 'working men' and 93 per cent of 'working women' wanted gardens. More pointedly still, when questioned about *where* they would like to live, 'a large section of the [local] population' named Middlesbrough's existing suburbs, because of 'their open development, more modern housing and more healthy surroundings'.¹⁸ Some planners might have blanched at such findings, fearing that they would be used to justify sprawl and incursions into the green belt. But Lock took a more relaxed view. His approach balanced the desire for extensive development with the need to preserve both the countryside and what he saw as one of the town's great glories, the vista of the Cleveland Hills to the south. Six new estates would be built on the fringes of the town, 'pointing southward towards the sun and view', but each would be closely demarcated, separated out by 'green wedges' that flowed right into the city centre. As Lock explained, what he sought to create resembled the imprint of a spread out hand, with the estates as the fingers, and the wedges as the spaces in-between.¹⁹ Again, this was a solution that gave due weight to what ordinary Middlesbrough people really wanted.

A forgotten tradition

Lock's planning in Middlesbrough was innovative and significant. Many of his contemporaries recognised that popular participation in planning was important,²⁰ but few gave it such salience or identified such a clear pathway for its implementation. Nevertheless, the whole episode made far less of an impact on developments over the next thirty years than might have been expected. Symptomatically, when planners, politicians, and community activists turned again to the problem of consultation at the end of the 1960s, few, if any, referred back to Lock's magnum opus. Indeed, the widely shared view, best captured in David Eversley's very influential *The Planner in Society*, was that *all* 1940s planning had been in essence an exercise in paternalism, with the planner and the planned operating, as in the earlier years, on entirely different 'planes'.²¹ What explains this unexpected amnesia?

Part of the explanation lies with the man himself. Lock was an enthusiastic and able communicator, but he never wrote the textbook that might have spread his ideas more widely. Moreover, from the mid-1950s, Lock often worked abroad, and this, too, obviously lessened his impact.²² Finally, it is notable that Lock, in later life, anyway grew rather disillusioned, believing that the achievements of his heyday had been squandered. Addressing a RIBA audience in 1964, he characterised the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act as stultifying, a measure that imposed bureaucratic procedures at the expense of real engagement. His considered view, in fact, was that British planning had become 'pot-bound'.²³ Whether this was true or not, it hardly encouraged the view that the 1940s legacy might be a source of inspiration for a younger generation.

At the same time, broader factors also need to be acknowledged. At the heart of Lock's wartime credo, as has been underlined, was the insistence that planners must necessarily work with sociologists. Yet this was always likely to attract controversy. The disciplines of planning and sociology had grown up following very different paths, and there was little sense of compatibility or dialogue among their practitioners.²⁴ One observer characterized the gulf between the two professions in the early 1950s as follows:

If...the planner were to ask for advice about the planning of a railway, and the frequency with which trains should be run along the lines...the sociologist would give him a report on the colours of the socks worn by the engine-drivers...perhaps...embellished by a series of statistical correlations between those colours and the drivers' sex life and criminal propensities.²⁵

In this situation, Lock could easily be perceived as a maverick, neither 'one of us' nor 'one of them', and thus fair game for reviewers in the specialist journals.²⁶ Again, this hardly helped his reputation.

Political fashions, too, may have played their part. Lock held progressive views, as has been noted, but he was never zealous or sectarian. Questioned in 1944 about how he got along with Middlesbrough's councillors, he replied that they were 'very reasonable and helpful', and singled out the Conservative mayor for particular praise.²⁷ But in the late 1960s, the tone of discussion was rather different. Some activists and academics took a much more polemical line, based upon neo-marxist concepts like the 'local state', and there was a general sense that planning was becoming highly political and therefore contentious. In this later context, Lock's implicit belief in the importance of consensus inevitably seemed increasingly outdated.

Conclusion

Max Lock was an important Twentieth Century British planner, whose determination to “retain the imagination of the planned”²⁸ gave his work in places like Middlesbrough a particular quality and integrity. Yet, as this paper has noted, Lock ultimately never received the attention that he deserved – and this is a reminder, if any was needed, that history can sometimes be the most unforgiving of arbiters.

Notes

- 1 *Independent*, 3 May 1988 and Max Lock Centre Exhibition Research Group, *Max Lock 1909-1988*, London: University of Westminster, 1996.
- 2 Max Lock, 'The Revolution in Town Planning', in F.J. Osborn (ed.), *Planning and Reconstruction 1944-45*, London and New York: Todd Publishing, 1945, pp.95-6.
- 3 Max Lock, 'Preface', in Ruth Glass (ed.), *The Social Background of a Plan. A Study of Middlesbrough*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948, p.xiii.
- 4 Lock, 'The Revolution', p. 96.
- 5 Lock 'Preface', p.xiii.
- 6 Glass, *The Social Background*, pp.1-6. For the Social Survey, see Frank Whitehead, 'The Government Social Survey', in Martin Bulmer (ed.), *Essays on the History of British Sociological Research*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp.83-100
- 7 *Illustrated*, 11 November 1944.
- 8 F.J. Osborn (ed.), *Planning and Reconstruction 1948*, London and New York: Todd Publishing, 1948, pp. 345-6.
- 9 Max Lock et al., *The Middlesbrough Survey and Plan*, Middlesbrough: Middlesbrough Corporation, 1947; Glass, *The Social Background*.
- 10 Max Lock, 'Town Planning and Public Relations', *Town and Country Planning*, Vol. 14 No. 55, 1946, pp. 110-14.
- 11 *Listener*, 11 October 1945; Max Lock Centre Exhibition Research Group, *Max Lock*; and *Picture Post*, 11 August 1945. The popular version of the plan was published as Max Lock, *A Plan for Middlesbrough. The Proposals in Outline*, Middlesbrough: Middlesbrough Corporation, 1945, priced at 2/6d. (30p). See also *Architects' Journal*, 2 August 1945.
- 12 J.B. Priestley, *English Journey*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, pp. 319-20.
- 13 See, for example, National Archives [hereafter NA] HLG 108/5, Dinah Fine, 'Two Towns. Middlesbrough and Malvern. Preliminary Report', May 1947, pp. 18-19.
- 14 *Listener*, 11 October 1945, and NA HLG 108/5, Fine, 'Two Towns', p.20-1.
- 15 For the background here, see Andrew Homer, 'Creating New Communities: The Role of the Neighbourhood Unit in Post-war British Planning', *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 14 No.1, 2000, pp.63-80.
- 16 Glass, *The Social Background*, p.43.
- 17 Max Lock, 'The Middlesbrough Experiment: Planning From Within', in J. B. Drew, *The Architects' Year Book No. 2*, London: Elek Books, 1947, p.48.
- 18 Dennis Chapman, *A Social Survey of Middlesbrough. Part Three. Public Opinion in Relation to Planning and Housing*, London: Wartime Social Survey, 1946, p. 32 and p.16.
- 19 *Listener*, 11 October 1945; Lock, *A Plan for Middlesbrough*, pp.10-11.
- 20 Nick Tiratsoo, 'The Reconstruction of Blitzed British Cities, 1945-55: Myths and Reality', *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 14 No.1, 2000, pp.36-42.
- 21 David Eversley, *The Planner in Society. The Changing Role of a Profession*, London: Faber and Faber, 1973, p.161.
- 22 Max Lock Centre Exhibition Research Group, *Max Lock*.
- 23 University of Westminster, Max Lock Archive, 9.27, Max Lock, 'The Missing Half of Planning', paper delivered at RIBA, 15 December 1964, p.3 and passim.
- 24 Nick Tiratsoo, "'New vistas": the Labour Party, citizenship and the built environment in the 1940s', in Richard Weight and Abigail Beach (eds.), *The Right to Belong. Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960*, London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 1998, pp.144-5.
- 25 T. S. Simey, 'The contribution of the sociologist to town planning', *Journal of the Town Planning Institute*, Vol.39 No. 6, 1953, pp.126-7.
- 26 See, for example, William Holford, 'Quae Erimus', *Journal of the Town Planning Institute*, September-October 1947, pp.177-9, and R.L. Reiss and Max Lock, 'Middlesbrough Survey and Plan', *Town and Country Planning*, Vol. 15 No.60, 1947-48, pp.184-195.
- 27 *Illustrated*, 11 November 1944.
- 28 Quoted in Peter Newman, 'Locked in to modern practice', *Planning*, 24 January 1997.

