CREATING A LIVEABLE REGION:

A Recipe of Principles and Aphorisms for Preparing a Regional Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

As a member of the Panel of Advisors, I have a challenging task, especially in terms of my role at this critically important conference. Since I have your attention for only a few minutes, it is incumbent upon me to use your time wisely and leave you with some lasting messages. But I am torn between two realities. On the one hand, I can claim to have only a very modest understanding of your hopes, dreams, challenges and opportunities. Just because I "come from away" and have some scholarly and professional credentials does not make me an expert about your communities. As a "blow-in," it is understandable that my views will be received with some scepticism. On the other hand, I have been invited to be here and to contribute to the process; after all, if I have nothing to say I should have stayed at home.

Well, as you might expect, I do have something to say. But I do so with a strong sense of humility. My advice—based upon a quarter century of planning experience in the academic, public, private and voluntary sectors—is meant to stimulate your thinking and to urge you to enthusiastically engage in the regional planning process.

In approaching my task, I considered sharing with you the successes and failures, challenges and opportunities of my home—the Greater Vancouver Region and the larger Cascadia (a transborder region encompassing British Columbia, Washington and Oregon). But as interesting as this story is, I have decided to take quite a different tact. In my experiences of teaching, studying and actually doing planning, I have compiled what I believe is a tasty and satisfying recipe for success, and it is this recipe I want to share with you. It is a challenging recipe, but I can assure you that the result is well worth the effort.

This recipe for liveability consists of ten ingredients (or principles) and ten cooking instructions (or aphorisms). And all ingredients and all steps are essential—if one is left out, the result may be edible, but it will not be a satisfying meal.

THE INGREDIENTS / PRINCIPLES

1. <u>Be Comprehensive</u>

In particular, it is essential that we do not focus extensively on housing issues in attempting to achieve more compact and complete urban forms. The fact is that residential uses are not the only villains in the misuse of land, the visual clutter of our countryside, or the loss of agricultural land. The problem also includes understanding all aspects of human settlements in their regional context. In North America, the problem is a combination of three factors:

- the declining densities and the wasteful consumption of land in other functions such as commercial, industrial, warehousing, mega-stores, transportation, leisure uses, and the withholding of land for speculative purposes

- overly rigid standards, such as engineering and parking, imposed on both redevelopment ***and*** new land zonings, and

- the absence of ***regional*** coordination between residential developments and the locations and densities of places of work, shopping and recreation.

2. Understand the Evolutionary Nature of Change

Explain—and stress—to everyone that planning is about evolutionary and organic change. Human settlements—cities (like Belfast and Londonderry), towns (like Newry, Omagh and Ballymena) and villages (like Culleybackey and Fintona)—are, after all, living organisms and they—like nature itself—must adapt to survive.

3. Encourage Distinctive Adaptations To The Regional Plan

In North America today, one of the tragedies of much of our development since 1945 has been its sameness, leading some commentators to note that when they arrive in some places they discover that "there's no there there." Northern Ireland, fortunately, still has distinctive places (like Armagh, Downpatrick, and Coleraine), but unless care is taken, the same disease of "cookie cutter" approaches to planning can spread here. It is therefore important that distinctive communities encourage distinctive solutions to common problems.

This ingredient involves understanding at the outset of the process the unique characteristics of your communities. What do you really want to preserve, and what are you prepared to give up to achieve your goals.

4. Stress the Variable Impacts on People

One of the difficulties of planning, with all its talk of change and challenges, is that the impression is given that the changes will be immediate, major, and will affect each and every one of us.

But the changes proposed in the draft Regional Strategic Framework do not

propose that everyone suddenly or dramatically change their lifestyles. Many of you will live out your lives in your current, largely unchanged surroundings.

At the same time, we must recognize dramatic shifts in society's makeup, desires and needs. And planning is about meeting those legitimate needs.

5. Remember that Change Can Be Positive

The Regional Strategic Framework is not about change for change sake. Rather, it is about developing more livable communities containing ample affordable housing, good jobs, and an attractive natural environment with open space and sharply reduced pollution. It is about maintaining vibrant agriculture and reducing the voracious appetite of the private car for our land.

Most important, it is about making our world a better place by adding good things to it, instead of exclusively attempting to make a better world by preventing bad things from happening.

There are times these days when our society feels like a childproofed room: the safety latches are on and all the sharp objects have been put away. The result, however, is an aversion to innovation, to experimentation, to the excitement and energy of change. If only a fraction of the energy expended on stopping and regulating was transferred to building and encouraging, we would be far better off.

In this regard, one of the most important steps we can take is to devise systems for tracking performance in a number of key areas, an approach well developed in many jurisdictions through liveability indices or benchmark programs. This technique—which measures actual change rather than perceived change—would do much to overcome the power of myths and disinformation in our planning world and move us forward on the

basis of measurable performance. (See Appendix A for one example of a Livability Index).

6. Understand the Economics of Change

Speaking of myths, many of the most persistent surround development and especially the relationship between density and value.

In this regard, please remember that if it doesn't work economically, it doesn't work (unless the public is prepared to subsidize it).

There are, in fact, several rules of development that the private sector must obey if they want to survive and we—the public—must understand these imperatives. They include—to give you a few examples—the following:

DEVELOPMENT REALITIES

Reality 1: There is no best density.

Reality 2: There is a connection between density, infrastructure, and technology.

Reality 3: There is no shortage of land for development.

Reality 4: Low density can be expensive and inefficient.

Reality 5: Density is economic only at certain levels.

Reality 6: Low density development consumes land quickly, but mixed use, medium density makes the retention of rural character economic.

Reality 7: Increased density requires increased developer capitalization.

Reality 8: Increased density facilitates variety in housing form . . . Variety in housing form reduces developer risk.

Reality 9: Higher densities and effective redevelopment can reduce public costs.

Reality 10: Good urban design is essential.

Reality 11: Increased density facilitates affordable housing and conserves land.

Reality 12: Multi-family housing must mimic single-family qualities.

Reality 13: Existing ideas about open space must be re-examined.

Reality 14: Pricing mechanisms must reflect marketplace realities.

7. Stress the Need for Public Engagement and Leadership

The goal of politicians, planners and developers is, of course, to listen to many voices and many opinions and then create and implement an overall plan. It is *not* to broker among fragmented, short-term points of view.

The point here is that we must all be in the visioning and educating business—selling innovative versions of the future to a suspicious public. We cannot lead from behind, but must be out in front. The adage, “follow me, I’m right behind you” will not work in the coming decades. In this regard new techniques that utilize visual preference surveys, the internet, and informed civic organizations must be utilized if we are to move ahead. And remember that there is an enormous vested interest in the status quo, which resists any tampering with existing practices.

8. Use Public Resources Strategically

In exercising this leadership, government must revisit its own self-image and relearn how important it is in shaping communities as a result of the expenditure of public

resources. Roads, schools, government offices, and cultural facilities can all be used strategically to shape and influence development.

9. Adapt a Balanced View of the Natural and Built Environments

In approaching our challenges, we need as well to adopt a more balanced view of the natural and built environments. We seem to have forgotten that human settlements and the creatures that live in them—humans—are also a legitimate part of the ecosystem. And the well designed and built human settlement is still the most effective machine for conservation ever invented. Indeed urbanism is environmentalism.

10. Accept the Inevitability of Change

The final ingredient again is about change, a factor that is not only necessary but imperative. As with any living organism, communities and regions must adapt or die. But this fact is best viewed as a challenge, not a constraint, and challenges—openly met—result in new, more exciting, more fulfilling opportunities.

But coming to terms with ambiguity is difficult. The only one who really enjoys change is a wet baby. Machiavelli observed that “change has no constituency.” There is an undeniable comfort in sameness. Once you work hard to get things under control, you want to keep them that way.

But regions are as turbulent as the weather. Change will do to ideas and patterns set in concrete what Godzilla did to the skyscrapers. What we must do is stay in front of change, anticipate it and be ready to ride the change currents, focusing on what is important now.

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So much for the ingredients for this recipe for regional planning. How do we "cook" this assembly of components? An examination of successful regions around the world suggests that while there is no simple formula, there are some approaches that work far better than others.*

1. The Table Must Become Bigger, and Rounder

This first aphorism—or instruction—means that in our complex society we must ensure that everyone is involved. No more can established, white, male groups—composed of successful businessmen and bureaucrats—set and implement agendas. The fact is that "a lot of folks need listening to." As well, as the analogy of the round table suggests, we must learn to communicate face to face. The fact is that every person in our communities is either an asset or a liability—we must be in the business of ensuring that all citizens—in one form or another—are at the table and working toward the common goals.

And remember, what people are not up on, they tend to be down on!

2. The Agenda is Getting Tougher

When we engage in planning, we often reduce our discussions to public works projects (housing, roads, utilities, etc.) but give short shrift to the human problems, the kind that really need neighbourhood-to-neighbourhood attention by a caring society. I know that in Northern Ireland, hundreds of urban and rural community groups have been

formed over the past two decades and all have an important role to play. As well, social issues relating to education, job creation, and social interaction are not solved with a simple plan. They require flexibility, major resource allocation and staying power.

3. The Only Thing More Challenging Than a Crisis May Be Its Absence

If we begin our planning process by believing things are pretty much O.K., we are destined to make small, inadequate plans. Like a frog in a pot of water, too complacent to make his strategic leap until the fire below has brought the water to a boil and he's cooked, many regions bask in a blissful denial of their increasing vulnerability to competitive forces until it's too late.

One of the critical steps is to understand a region's assets and liabilities, and to work to protect and enhance the assets and remove or reduce the liabilities.

4. There is No Magical Leadership Structure—Just People and Relationships

Everywhere I go, people ask: what region is doing everything right? What's the formula? And the answer must be: there is no formula, no trusty chart, no regional map to follow. Every region does it differently. What is common is good networking, collaboration, and cooperation.

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* These aphorisms were first developed by Neil Peirce, a nationally syndicated urban columnist in the U.S. I ackowledge my debt to this work.

5. No One's Excused: Make a Commiment

This can seem a forceful, yet nebulous declaration, so let me give it some dimension.

A commitment is a dream with a deadline.

A commitment must begin with an attempt to think clearly about goals, to give them boundaries and directions, and a willingness to make mid-course corrections without losing sight of the goal. It is the willingness to relate to others; to sustain a sense of urgency even when the house is not on fire.

And everyone must be involved, not just government and business. Our universities must be challenged to provide much fuller leadership than ever before, as must our professions, our faith communities, and—most definitely—the media.

6. Sometimes the Old Ways Still Work

There is a tendency these days, as more people accept the reality of inclusive processes, to dismiss the capacity of individual leaders—especially if they are white and male, or perhaps Protestant or Catholic, depending on your point of view. That's a mistake—smart, committed individuals from all parts of the community can make a difference. After all, all change is a function of character and circumstance. And our challenges are too great to dismiss the contributions of those with leadership capacity and skills, whatever their background.

7. Collaboration is Messy, Frustrating—And Indispensible

Not everyone like collaboration. For many of us, our idea of a good meeting is just two people—me telling you what to do. Or the Prime Minister who, when seen talking to himself and asked what he was doing, responded: "I'm having a Cabinet Meeting."

But these tidy power trips do not travel well in today's world.

Behind all the buzz about collaboration is a discipline. And with all due respect to the ancient arts of representative democracy and diplomacy, the more recent art of collaboration represents something new. If it contained a Silicon chip, we would all be excited.

The fact is, "if you want the hen to lay, you have to tolerate the cackle."

8. Government Always Needs Reforming, But All Reform Needs Government

In recent years, most democracies in Europe and North America have witnessed a dramatic rise in the distrust of government. And for most of us, one of our favourite pastimes is disparaging our elected officials. But even a healthy skepticism can shackle our governments in the new global economy. Government in Northern Ireland is at least 30% of the economy. Regional survival and regional improvement requires innovative, effective and efficient government. We cannot compete or thrive without it.

9. Place Matters

While we increasingly live in a cyber-age, globally connected, with instant communications and multinational corporations, geographic home is still vital. If schools are mediocre, if the air or water is polluted, if the crime rate is high, you know place matters. Even corporations increasingly recognize that to be successful, they must be both "in" and "of" a place.

We all need to be grounded. And the only places to practice good civics is in a community.

The message, simply, is: We all yearn for places to live that have beauty, distinction, character, pride.

Place matters—

- in city and town
- in West Belfast or East Belfast
- in the Bogside or the Waterside
- in your small village

10. It's Never Over

More than ever, the new, global economy says drift is a luxury we cannot afford. It is those regions that prize alertness and fresh thinking, that approach the future with a sense of adventure and experimentation, which engage their citizens, that will have the best chance for a bright future.

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To conclude, let me suggest to you that this conference is designed with at least three goals:

- **To build** on the momentum generated by the ideas and suggestions put forward today by the DOE.

- **To encourage** engagement, commitment and leadership by everyone in your communities.

- **To enhance** the possibilities for Northern Ireland to be a world leader in effective community building.

In addressing these goals remember—above all—that livable communities don't just happen, they are consciously created by the people who live there.

APPENDIX A

A LIVABILITY INDEX: CRITICAL TOOL FOR REGIONAL PLANNING

What is a liveable region? Ask 10 people and you will receive 10 different answers. It is time we developed an index to measure livability.

Although the focus of most community development strategies is a livable region, the objective criteria by which the livability of a region can actually be measured is vague. It is possible to develop a comprehensive index that could in fact measure advances—or declines—in livability. In the urban mobility category, for example, transportation services could be evaluated in terms of access, efficiency (including average travel times), environmental soundness, and cost of service. High points would be awarded for good access within and between communities, with additional points for services to the handicapped and the elderly. Such values would then be combined on a scale and reported on a regular basis (probably biannually), similar to air quality indices or cost of living indices already in common use. Such an index would highlight problem areas, thereby indicating when attention and resources are necessary.

LIVABILITY INDEX CATEGORIES

1. Air & Water Quality
2. Transportation & Mobility
3. Housing
4. Health & Health Care
5. Economy
6. Education
7. Recreation & Cultural Facilities
8. Equity & Safety
9. Physical Environment
10. Social Systems

Similarly, in the equity and safety category, high points would be awarded for gender, age, ethnic and handicapped participation rates in economic, recreation, cultural and political activities. Low points would be given for high crime rates, while high points would be given for effective street lightning, crime prevention program, traffic control and so on.

Many benefits could be derived from developing a livability index that is based on regional policy goals. Translating regional goals to an objective index would provide a "language" that all residents can understand, allowing them to "measure" the progress of the region. The index would also be a tool for allocating resources, assessing the relative success of various policies, and the need for additional investment.

The categories for the index are still general; a functional index will require a good deal of development. But it does suggest the sort of gauge that would focus debate quickly. Thus, for example, an expenditure on a project should increase the total score for the index (with 1000 being perfect). It would also be possible to compare the impact on the index of spending in one area—say health services—with spending in another area—say public transit.

The development of such an index is a key task for regional planning.

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A LIVABILITY INDEX

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORY	POINTS	TOTAL POINTS
1. Air & Water Quality	air quality	50	
	water quality	50	100
2. Mobility	travel times (autos & transit)	20	
	cost	20	
	availability of public transit	20	
	use of public transit	20	
	relation to work to residence	20	100
3. Housing	availability	25	
	choice (location & type of housing)	25	
	quality	25	
	affordability	25	100
4. Health & Health Care	state of health (mental & physical)	50	
	health care (access, cost quality)	50	100

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORY	POINTS	TOTAL POINTS
5. Economy	unemployment rate	10	
	job creation rate	10	
	new business creation rate	10	
	trade figures	10	
	gross regional product	10	
	diversity of economy	10	
	average income	10	
	measure of social/human capital	10	
	measure of natural captial	10	
	measure of physical capital	10	100
6. Education	participation rates	30	
	cost	30	
	quality	30	
	variety	10	100
7. Recreation & Cultural	variety	20	
Facilities	quality	20	
	cost	20	
	vitality	20	
	accessibility	20	100

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORY	POINTS	TOTAL POINTS
8. Equity & Safety	gender, age, ethnic and handicapped participation rates in economic, recreation, cultural and political activities	50	
	crime levels	30	
	safety considerations	20	100
9. Physical Environment	quality of urban design/form	15	
	views	15	
	quality of green space	25	
	amount of green space	25	
	noise pollution	20	100
10. Social Systems	poverty rate	20	
	homeless rate	20	
	welfare rates	20	
	support systems (public & private)	40	100
			1000