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HOMBRE

"Holistic Management of Brownfield Regeneration"

D 6.4: Profitable places for people: Policy priority or political pipe-dream?

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Summary

Take home messages:

1. Europe's urban brownfield sites are valuable latent resources
2. Urban land use decisions should be expected to deliver a clear 'Return on Investment'
3. Understanding urban systems in terms of their environmental, social, economic and governance performance is an essential part of sustainable urban land management
4. Multiple land uses are both possible and most likely to deliver adequate RoI
5. Implementing sub surface technologies in serial or parallel can uplift RoI
6. Multiple soft end uses can deliver multiple services and uplift RoI for land unsuited or unneeded for hard development
7. Online map tools can assist local stakeholders identify creative land use options

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1 HOMBRE Holistic Management of Brownfield Regeneration

HOMBRE seeks a paradigm shift whereby brownfields become areas of opportunity that deliver value-laden services for society, instead of derelict areas that are considered devoid of potential and full of liability. This shift involves decoupling the land use and land management cycles and systematically seeking synergies between different types of services to leverage change where none was previously feasible. Each Brownfield has its own latent potential to deliver services and hence add value to their urban system. Synergies could entail services like development + water management + renewable energy generation. HOMBRE also offers insights into gaining better a understanding of local urban systems to bring about early recognition that land might become Brownfield, giving time to take preventative action. HOMBRE's suite of tools, methods and practical guidance are available from www.zerobrownfield.eu.

2 Brownfields are urban land management assets

Brownfield sites are the secret weapon in delivering sustainable European cities. Admittedly such sites have been affected by former uses of the site or surrounding area; are derelict or underused; are mainly in fully or partly developed urban areas; may have real or perceived contamination problems but certainly require intervention to bring them back to beneficial use (CABERNET 2007). They are often also in the right place to deliver profitable places for people. Brownfields were originally seen as a disease in their own right whereas they are in fact a symptom of structural change and ordinary cycles of human endeavor. Over the past 40 years many European cities have made a transition from polluting, heavy engineering or mining centres to clean, service or advanced manufacturing centres. Germany's Ruhr or the UK's Leeds have transformed their environment and economies are now reaping social dividends. Elsewhere the transition has either faltered or gone into reverse resulting in shrinking cities or mass youth unemployment.

An empirical approach to improved management of brownfields is increasingly unaffordable:

“Build and let’s see what happens” is a luxury of a bygone – pre Global Financial Crisis era. Too many regeneration projects petered out once the initial capital outlay was exhausted.

“Invest with a predictable Return on Investment” (ROI) is the new norm. The challenge is making robust, reliable predictions of that ROI. However conventional cost benefit analysis is inadequate for appraising long term investments that span generations. Only by developing, and then regulating on the basis of, a better understanding of complex, dynamic city systems can the ROI of brownfield reuse be appreciated.

3 Cities as unique complex systems

Cities serve similar functions, offer similar services and make similar demands. Yet they have distinctive features, resources and constraints. As such generic models of urban land management have a role to play in developing broad awareness but city specific models –conceptual, qualitative or quantitative – are needed to gain the deep understanding needed for evidence based decision making. Going beyond static models, dynamic simulations of cities functioning can help discern the scale and nature of the consequences of different decisions and courses of action.

4 SMART thinking

Tradition linear, sequential land use and management systems have been effective but inefficient.

Avoiding obvious, unsustainable, waste synergies and concurrent activity are needed. Thinking about the land use after next, anticipating when a given parcel of land is likely to be free for reuse, seeking the maximum service out of a given consumption of resources.

HOMBRE considers urban brownfields as a latent resource in sustainable urban land management. As Europe's cities progress their need for land will fluctuate: some cities will need more land and some less. HOMBRE has developed both a new way of thinking – decoupling the land use and land management cycles; seeking synergies; expecting tangible value from soft reuses – and new techniques to improve city system understanding, simulate the effects of land reuse, enhance the environmental benefits of remediation and material recovery technologies. HOMBRE's Brownfield Navigator both contains a flexible spatial visualization tool and signposts the HOMBRE tools and technologies described above.

Europe's policy of creative, stable and eco-efficient cities is nearer to being able to being realized because of the deeper understanding and more sophisticated solutions HOMBRE has developed. Previous approaches to the built environment have revolved around a general linear pattern of land use based on a "consume & dispose" approach to construction materials. Once buildings came to the end of their useful life, they would lie vacant or be demolished and most of the resulting debris would be discarded. A life cycle approach to both land use and resource stewardship is emerging in both land and construction materials. By dismantling rather than decommissioning the creation of large amounts of unusable and highly problematic mixed waste is avoided by materials being reused or recovered. The past no longer has to – or even ought to – be the key to the future. We can both envision a new future and contribute to its delivery.