

Fringe Belts and Fixation Lines. Is the Urban Jigsaw the best way of meeting contemporary Planning needs?

Conzen's early Post War work on urban morphologies (Whitehand 1988, 2007) remains relevant, but the process it describes deserves more criticism than evident in most current attempts to reform or evaluate the performance of Town and Country Planning in the UK. Simple mapping of urban change shows that blocks of land are often developed or redeveloped together, creating and over time adapting a complex urban mosaic. This tends to incorporate adjacent countryside and to change the use of large sites previously occupied by transport, industry and other activities that no longer use this land (schools, hospitals, playing fields, allotments, retail parks, military facilities...). Where such sites are in effect abandoned, and not made available for alternative uses for some years or decades, this process may be critically described as 'urban fallow' (Clark 1985, 2001).

Changes to the UK's long established Planning system under New Labour and Coalition administrations emphasise a few favoured rhetoric goals (sustainability, localism, climate change), but offer limited opportunities for popular engagement with, or criticism of, the planning process. This tends to facilitate or require most residential and other larger scale new construction to fit into the big blocks of land allocated for particular types of development. Resulting in a jigsaw pattern with urban morphology characteristics similar to those identified by Conzen, Whitehand and others. Their *fixation lines* and *fringe belts* influenced the study of urban morphology in the early Post War period, most notably through Conzen's mapping of urban chronology in Alnwick Conzen 1960, in Whitehand 1988). In recent years (Gu 2010) the terminology has been used to incorporate more recent opportunity sites, such as dockland areas, railway sidings and airports, a development that Whitehand was reluctant to consider earlier.

Relatively uniform 'estates' characterise most urban places, to the extent that we 'read' these landscapes chronologically as well as in socio-economic terms, and in terms of perceived risk: 'safe' or 'desirable' 1930s residential suburbs, 'dangerous' 20C inner city areas, 'development potential' in and around redundant sites and 'emerging' Victorian and Edwardian neighbourhoods. Some places such as industrial estates and large hospital complexes seem 'alien' or best avoided while others, such as big shopping complexes, 'festival' sites and newly revamped seaside promenades, have become major attractions. The process of town planning helps structure our behaviour and expectations and deserves criticism for what it leaves out. There is less or no provision for nature, for informal play and recreation and for individualistic and non-corporate provision. While the language used in planning documents generally favours preservation of unspoilt countryside and seeks to be 'inclusive' and to consult, planning may have the effect of destroying natural assets and heritage, and of limiting individual choice to what a few, monopolistic, globalised corporations make available to consumers.

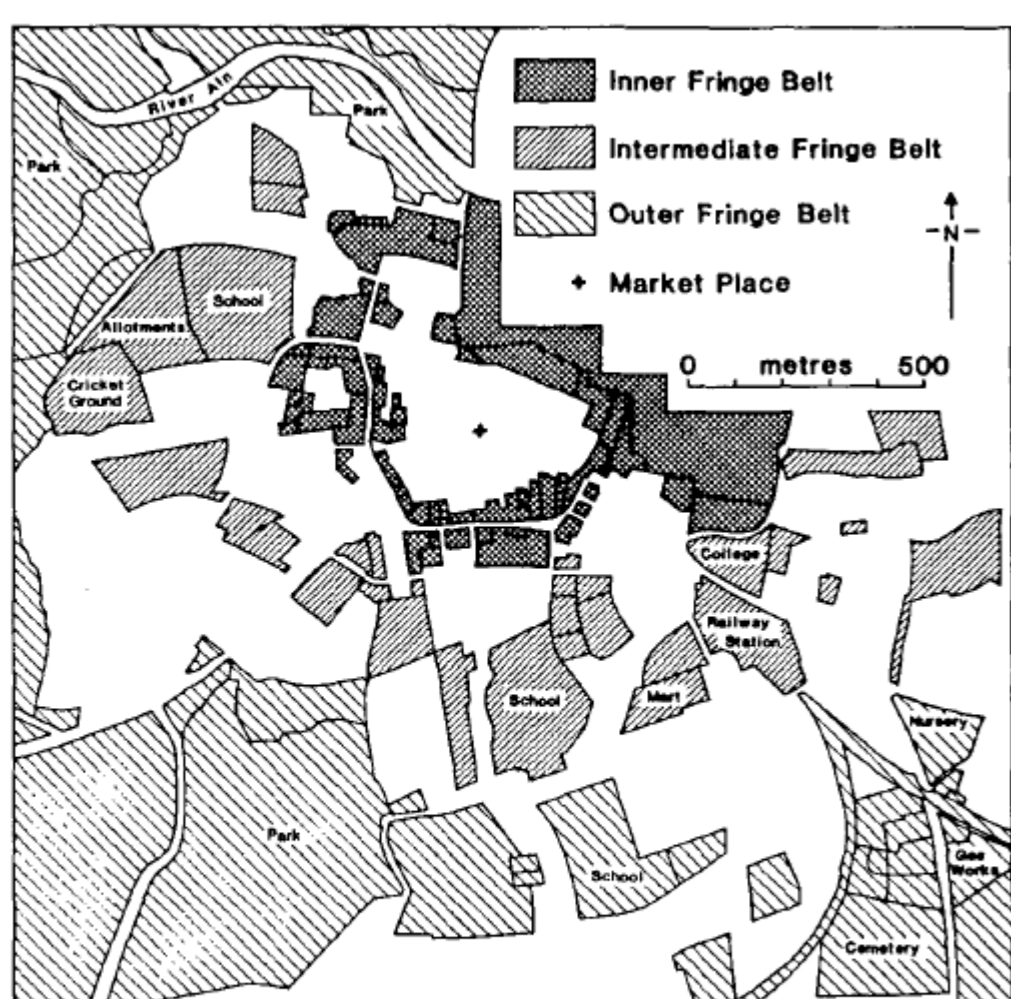


Figure 3. The fringe belts of Alnwick, 1956. Source: M. R. G. Conzen, *Alnwick, Northumberland: a Study in Town-Plan Analysis*. Institute of British Geographers Publication No. 27. London: George Philip, 1960, Fig. 13.

Whitehand, J.W.R. (1988), p51.

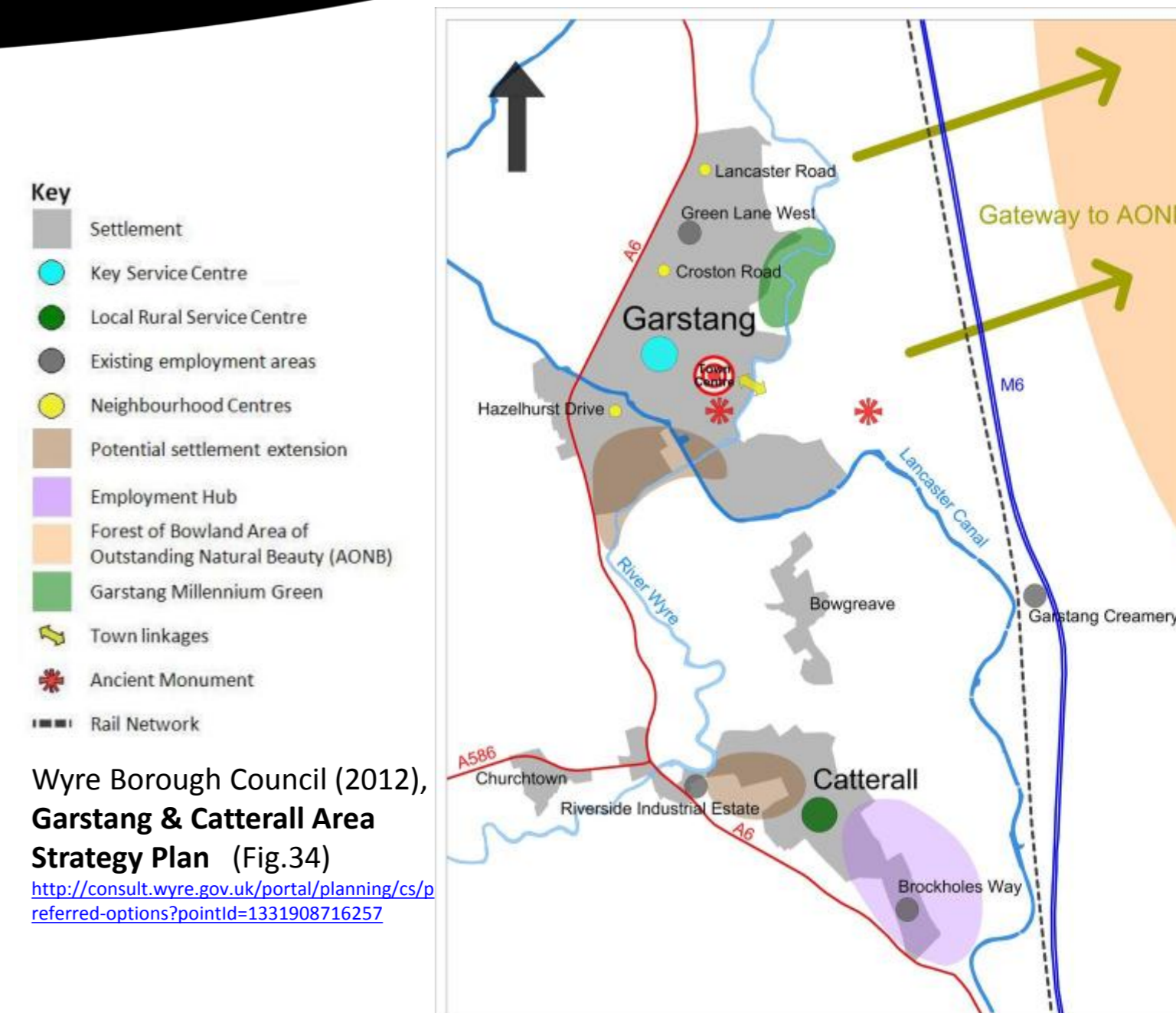
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While sequential urban change suggests that plans and development control determines what is built, where and when, it is arguable that other plans and investment commitments are also important. Development is more expensive and difficult where there is no existing or committed infrastructure for water supply and drainage, electricity grids and transformers, gas mains or telecoms, one reason why some 'prime' development and redevelopment sites have taken so long to be used. The artificial scarcity created by planning may encourage speculators to 'hoard' land indicated or designated for development, as in the Wyre Borough Council 2012 draft 'potential settlement extension' (shaded brown) and Central Lancashire's 'New housing development' (pink) on the map extracts from recent planning documents above. Policing abuse of plan based monopolies is difficult, especially when markets are depressed, banks are reluctant to lend and state intervention seeks to maintain property values. It is not in a corporate landowners' interests for the value of its land banks to fall, or to allow rivals development opportunities that may threaten its market share, or remove future investment possibilities. A recent European Commission report (2013) adds the criticism that '*the planning system, including green belt restrictions, continues to be an important constraint on the supply of housing*'. It would be useful if an updated version of Conzen's urban morphology mapping exercise could extend beyond the existing built up area and include current land ownership and value as well as planning designation and infrastructure status. But dynamic plan designations (and drafts removal after consultation) and the peculiarities of English land registration make more than a partial snapshot difficult.

Suggestions for further study, as a research project, a way of critically engaging with the planning process, or an exercise in exploring the workings of the market in property at an urban scale.

1. Map any urban area's chronological development in a way that identifies Conzonian fringe belts (Whitehand 2007): areas of 'urban fallow' subsequently 'filled in', or remaining as (in market terms) 'sub-optimal' land use - with 'development potential' to be realised once the necessary investment and permission can be obtained.
2. Evaluate these areas in terms of (i) their current social, economic, aesthetic and ecological value and (ii) their market potential. To what extent does any disparity between (i) and (ii) represent intangible / non-market benefits, or a need to find political or other means (Whitehand 2006) to overcome market forces that would otherwise destroy community benefits, natural heritage etc.?
3. Note where processes of 'densification' and of peripheral expansion are planned &/or underway (Quastel et al 2012). Who are likely to be the main beneficiaries or consumers / users of these schemes? To what extent is development or redevelopment controlled by one or more large land owners? Is there any provision for development or redevelopment opportunities at a smaller scale (eg. individual building plots, refurbishment of single properties etc.)? Are compulsory purchase powers to be used to assemble a site for a single developer?
4. Note assets (informal green-space, 'spare' land with ecological or amenity value, allotments, etc.) that may be 'incorporated within' development areas. To what extent are such losses compensated for by equivalent provision elsewhere? In other words, are *Ecological Services* recognised by the impact assessment process? Is this sufficient?
5. Suggest alternatives to the designation of large blocks of development and redevelopment land.



Lancashire County Council (2013) **Constraints On Development/Approved Development To 2026** (Fig 9).
<http://council.lancashire.gov.uk/documents/s17147/Appendix%20A.pdf>