

Amsterdam, Formation of AESOP and a trip to a Planning Committee

My "Diary" article in 1987 records the formation of the Association of European Schools of Planning, AND of the Scottish Torquay United Supporters Club (which has not proved as long-lasting).

The article was first published in *Planning* on 11 December 1987 and is reproduced with the kind permission of the editor.

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COMMENT



REALITY, FROM THE NETHERLANDS TO TORQUAY UNITED

Sunday

Amsterdam. I came here last Thursday for the inaugural congress of the Association of European Schools of Planning. It has rained non-stop. Having been born and bred in Manchester, swaddled in a sou'wester and plastic mac, I have a particular aversion to foreign rain.

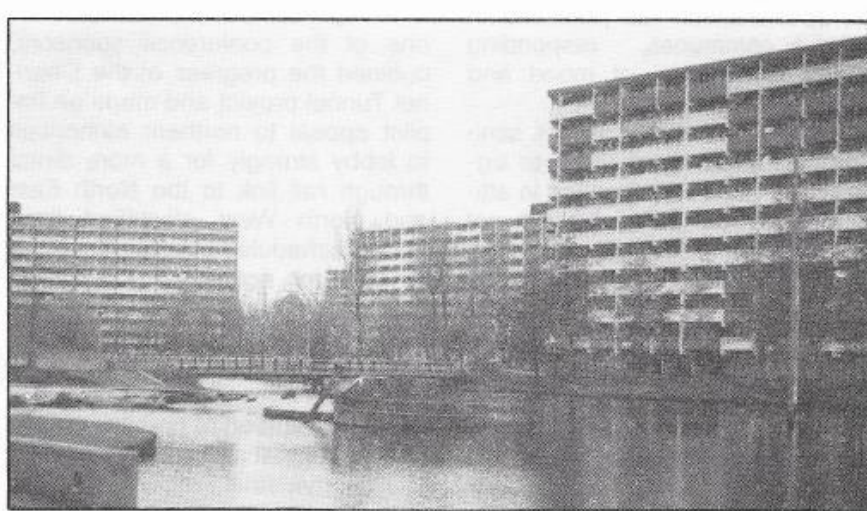
Not out of chauvinism; Amsterdam's rain matches Salford's best concoctions in intensity, variety and wetness. Quite simply, when I go abroad, I expect the sun to shine, even at this time of year. When it doesn't I feel cheated, not elated, by the realisation that others don't actually enjoy benefits denied to me.

Still, even in the rain, Amster-

dam, this year's European City of Culture, does have a certain something that cannot be found in Salford, and which will still be elusive in Glasgow when that city wears the European cultural crown for 1990.

I have the morning free, so I head for Bijlmermeer. This public housing estate on the south-eastern edge of Amsterdam was built in the 1960s and early 1970s, housing about 25,000 people.

The massive zig-zag of ten-storey slab blocks probably looked exciting on the drawing board, but Bijlmermeer quickly became a by-word for the problems of the outer estates in the Netherlands. I haven't seen it since 1973, but Amsterdam now has 60,000 unemployed, and I've seen plenty of de-



Bijlmermeer - ten-storey zig-zag slab blocks with pond and play area

pressed housing estates on the edge of British cities.

The visual clues suggest that Bijlmermeer shares some of the characteristics of Britain's outer estates. Car ownership is low, incomes are below average, people queue to use the public phones, there are signs of a high child population and there's graffiti; the residents are disproportionately black.

But there isn't the sense of despair and isolation that you get in Britain. The public phones actually work. There is a substantial pedestrianised shopping centre with a wide range of big-name retailers. I can't see any boarded-up or burnt-out flats. Industrial units are still occupied. It takes me ten minutes to get back into town on the metro.

I get off at Nieuwmarkt, where redevelopment for the metro was bitterly resisted by action groups in the 1970s. Their confrontations with the rot police are commemorated in a fragmented mural on the metro wall.

Scenes from the struggle are depicted between tumbling bricks as the huge iron ball of the demolition men hits the wall, to this Dutch tolerance, or a memento to heroic resistance, or a way of neutralising and incorporating urban protest, or all three!

Completing the nostalgia I visit the Jordaan, on the fringe of the city centre. In the 1970s I had friends in action groups here. They were opposing redevelopment of this historic working-class district of tall canal houses with precipitous staircases. They won.

There has been some infill, but the street markets are still there

amid the fascinating lattice of tiny streets. Today the threat to community is less from planning than from market forces. On a brief visit in the rain the Jordaan does not look as gentrified as I'd feared it might have been.

So I head for Schiphol and home, heady with the rediscovery of paths I had trodden so long ago. The broad-based community action in defence of place and class which Action Group Jordaan practised in the early 1970s still seems an exemplar for a planning practice that is participatory and redistributive.

Planning should be about co-operative working to make places better for those who live there. Such planning should be educative to all those involved, and it should be fun. In the end the victories of Amsterdam's action groups were only partial, but victories are scarce and should be celebrated. I buy a bottle of jenever at the duty-free to prolong the reverie through the long winter nights.

Monday

My 13-year-old daughter Alice is doing a local history project at school. She's trying to find out about the Union Canal, which runs from Edinburgh to Falkirk. The waterways board ranger for the canal is giving a talk to the Corstorphine Literary and Geographical Society.

I drive Alice to the public hall in the eminently middle-class Edinburgh suburb, where the society meets each Monday evening through the winter. It is a cold night, and I expected that there will be about 20 people there. In fact there are 200, and the room is packed



President Klaus Kunzmann of Dortmund University demonstrates how to do shadow rabbits to the Association of European Schools of Planning

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when we arrive two minutes after the advertised start.

The hall is already blacked out and the slides are on. As my eyes adjust to the dark I realise that Alice is the youngest person there. More surprisingly, I'm runner-up. The audience is overwhelmingly over 60, most over 70 and many well beyond that.

This is the pre-telly generation, those who respected knowledge gained through the written and spoken word, and strictly observed the niceties of polite society - though the dark and warmth are too much for one octogenarian who dozes off and snores gently through the latter part of the talk.

This audience is an endangered species. I am glad that I was able to observe it in its natural habitat, and that Alice has learnt something about local history that was not anticipated when the project was set.

Tuesday

I visit a place I have never seen before, Mary King's Close, deep beneath the City Chambers in Edinburgh's Old Town. It is a street which was closed in 1645 because it harboured the plague. Then in the 18th century the tenements in this steep street were built over, effectively serving as the foundations for what are now the City Chambers.

The street, its shops and houses, are remarkably intact, in part because it is not open to the general public, and so has not been substantially altered, though it did serve as an air raid shelter during the war. There were tales of ghosts and strange feelings in the air.

In these days when places like Scunthorpe are jumping on the tourist bandwagon, this is an asset of enormous potential. However, I am glad that it has not been swathed in tartan, sponsored by McDonalds and marketed by the heritage industry. Its mystery and bleak authenticity are what makes Mary King's Close a special place.

Wednesday

A dull, dark day. Not much happens.



Tartan hordes prepare to cross the border ...

Thursday

I take first year undergraduates to the district council planning committee. They see one of our ex-students appearing as a consultant for a company wanting permission for a non-food retail development, then a couple of more minor applications.

They see councillors who chat while applications are discussed then vote sometimes on party lines, sometimes not. They see that planners have to be able to address a meeting, build a logical argument, know the detail of a situation.

Outside I gather the students round, and start to explain these points. An itinerant drunk attaches himself to our group. Gaunt and grey, he sways gently at my side, full of bonhomie and bevvy and spits erratically around my feet. Unable to compete with this surrealism I give up.

Friday

I get a letter from someone who has read my diary in *Planning*. He urges me to keep doing it. I wonder if anyone else reads it.

Saturday

My son, Euan, goes to Carlisle with four friends from school. This is the Scottish Torquay United Supporters Club. For the time they will see their heroes, known until now only by their evocative names - Dobson, Loram, Dawkins ...

This unnatural fixation with Torquay began last winter, as an alternative to listening to the teacher in the O grade physics class. Torquay were chosen because there were bottom of the league.

I've suggested cold showers, and told Euan that Fawley Towers was set in Torquay because Basil Fawley is to hotel management what Torquay United are to football, but his teenage obsession is unquenchable. A week ago I was thinking of Johann Cruyff and that marvellous Dutch team of the mid 1970s, but the reality of Britain in the 1980s in Carlisle United v Torquay United.

Cliff Hague

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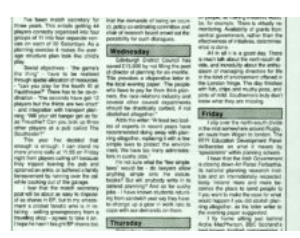
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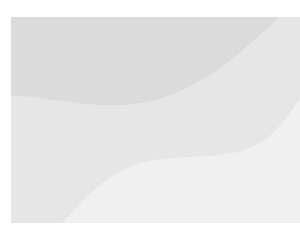
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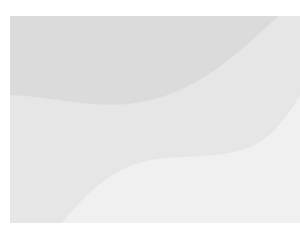
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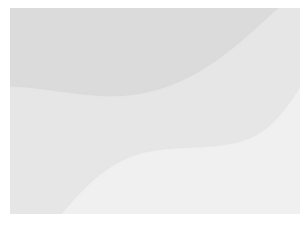
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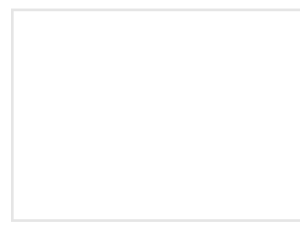
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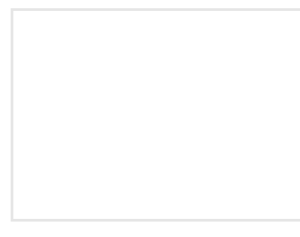
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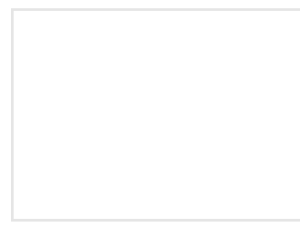
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