

Let's build a city

A proposal to build Britain's first new city in 50+ years to the east of Cambridge, housing 1 million people in affordable homes through Community Land Trust ownership. Why? After 15 years of stagnation, we need to unlock huge growth and prove to ourselves and the world Britain can still build extraordinary things that inspire the world.

By Shiv Malik & Joseph Reeve



Move Fast and Make Things.

Britain is broken. A nation of entrepreneurs, intrepid adventurers, experimenters and inventors, laid low. But by what?

There are a multitude of reasons one could give. Usually they're deployed to bolster one's own hobby horse – too much nanny state, too much EU, too low taxes on the wealthy, not enough public sector investment. But there is something more fundamental which might underpin it all – we simply stopped believing the future will be better than the past.

Modernity – that belief that the future will indeed be better than the past – is a fragile thing. In human history, this seeming dictum has rarely come true. Century to century, most things remained the same. More starkly, this belief, that the future will indeed be better than the past, is a recent invention. A creation of a mindset that can be charted to late 1600's France. The Romans didn't believe it. In fact almost all cultures in human history believed in some version of the Garden of Eden story; humanity had lived in a Golden Age, now lost to us, and our journey in time would mean slipping away from perfection, not travelling towards it.

But are Britons right to no longer place their faith in a better future? Bluntly put, yes they are. The numbers say they are correct. Growth has stalled, wages have declined.

Real average weekly earnings, outturn and OBR forecast: UK



Notes: Deflated to 2023-24 prices using CPI. Forecasts are calculated from successive OBR forecasts of average earnings and CPI, and indexed to the latest Average Weekly Earnings (regular pay) outturn available at the time of the relevant Economic and Fiscal Outlook. OBR's CPI forecasts have been seasonally adjusted. Source: RF analysis of ONS, Labour market statistics; ONS, Consumer price inflation; OBR, Economic and Fiscal Outlook, various.

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For example, despite all our advances in medicine, and seeming investment in health, a junior doctor was paid more 17 years ago than they are now. Housing is far more expensive than it was a generation ago. Raising a family is as well. We long stopped having children at a replacement rate. Despite iPhones, electric cars and cheaper clothes, if you wanted to do anything long term – save for a pension, have a family, buy your own home, progress your wage prospects – the past was strewn with more opportunity for prosperity than the present. And it doesn't look like it will get better any time soon.

So what has any of this got to do with building a city?

We are unable to build. If we can't build new things, we can't have a better future. No new 19th century infrastructure like schools, reservoirs, prisons, roads, railways, power stations, sewer systems, homes. It means we get none from the twentieth, like airports and high-speed rail, and leaves 21st century infrastructure like data centres and spaceports as fantasies.

If we can't deliver the tangible benefits of a better future, and are left merely promising them, is it any wonder that people stop believing in modernity altogether?

The right strategy for a pro-growth agenda

YIMBY's, pro-growthers, Futurists, Accelerationists have been fighting the good fight. They believe in modernity, abundance, in building, and unleashing potential. But their actions are somewhat small scale and there is no coherent strategy between these groups. They stand on the sidelines, critiquing our current dire state. They champion growth and those specific projects which they believe deliver it.

But generally, they endorse others' plans. Usually, these are central government projects or ones from private developers and businesses. YIMBY's have no overt plans of their own. Instead, they enable others.

And while they may win battles here and there, they will never win the war. While current rules remain, they can never hope to win 10,000 planning battles to deliver the homes or businesses Britain needs. The big hope is the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. And yet the forces rallied against it – scores of well entrenched lobby groups, NGOs and QUANGOs – are, at the time of writing, watering it down.



But even if the rules of the game are changed, so what? What are YIMBY's to expect? More local and central government led development? More Barratt homes on the edge of small towns and villages? Perhaps overhead walkways over a suburban train line don't take ten years to build. Maybe they take just two. Perhaps a few more data centres get built faster. But is this the future Accelerationists and YIMBY's want? More of the same, but a little faster?

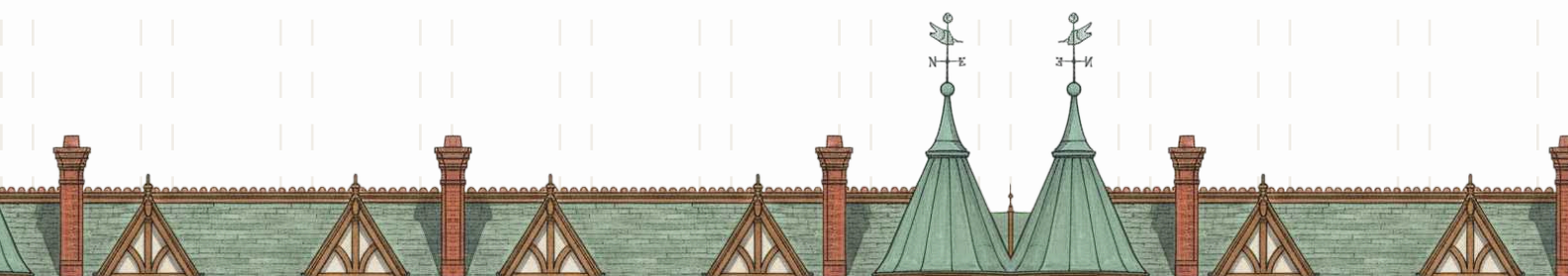
We think it's time to be far more ambitious. Let's fight for a grander vision. Something far more tangible than abstract, wonkish, rule changes. Let's fight for a project, and a vision which a broader collective can get behind. One that is independent of the central state but also not bound to the private developer mindset which itself lacks any real vision. We need something that points the way on the world stage and lets Britain once again be a by-word for ambition, invention, creativity and entrepreneurialism.

So what project? The most obvious answer to this is a city. The first in Britain, America and Europe in fifty years. One fight, one ambitious vision that proves the seemingly impossible is possible. A city where a new way of abundant living can be delivered for the next generation. A physical instantiation that progress is real. A proof that the future is so much obviously better than anything in the past, that it will be deeply embarrassing to realise how immiserated we've been for the last two decades.

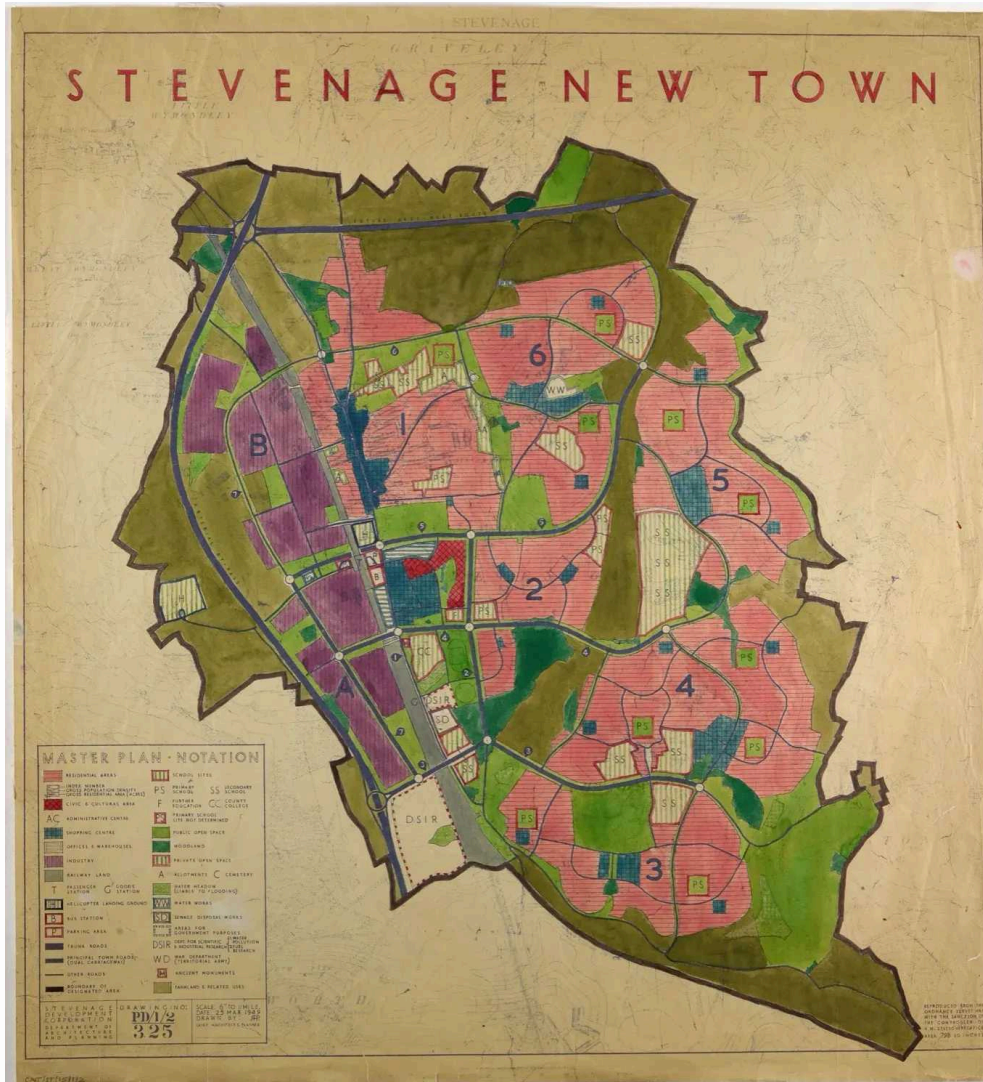
Isn't building cities impossible?

No. Far from it. Since 1949, China has built hundreds of them. We too used to do it. In living memory. Amongst rubble and ration books, Britain introduced the New Towns act in 1946. Not just to rebuild what had been destroyed, but to continue what visionaries like Ebenezer Howard had created in Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City and what previous British pioneers had built in Hampstead Garden Suburb, Bournville and Saltaire.

These towns and planned suburbs inspired urban planners around the world from the US to South Africa to Japan, who travelled to Britain to marvel at what we had achieved. Not just for the layout of the buildings, but the values they were built from, and the social change they embodied. Today, the last of those major new towns, Milton Keynes, generates an annual GDP of £16bn. More than Oxford and Cambridge combined and with 20,000 fewer people to boot.



More recently we turned a wasteland into a world class urban development. The site that included Europe's largest fridge mountain now houses amazing museum collections, hundreds of new businesses, and generates hundreds of millions in tax revenue each year. And we, the British, did it in less than 20 years. The place? Stratford City, East London.



1949 Stevenage Master Plan, via New Town Archives



Stratford went from Europe's largest fridge mountain in 2006 (left) to a neighbourhood of 20,000+ homes 19 years later (right).

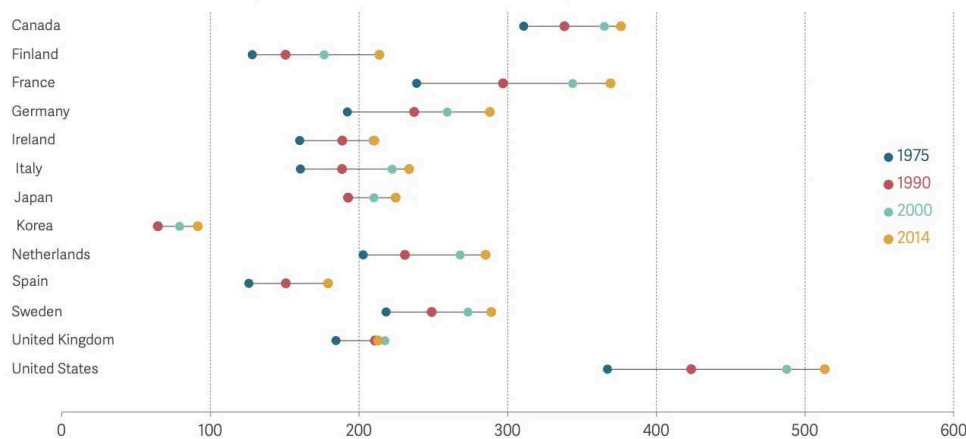


But is there enough space? Britain is dense and nature-depleted, but the crowding is optional: we cram more people into smaller homes than the rest of the OECD. The actual built-over land in England is just 8.7%. More than 83% of our land is agricultural land, forests and open water. If we choose to, we can easily expand our built areas significantly and have more than enough for both food and an abundant future. What's more: cities can host far more nature than they traditionally have.

Disturbingly, according to the OECD, we are the only major developed economy to have more built-up land on a per capita basis in the past than we do in the present. We've gone backwards while others like Japan, Sweden, Italy France, Germany, and the Netherlands have continued to improve the lives of their residents.

FIGURE 19: The amount of built-up land per capita has fallen in the UK

Built-up land per capita in square metres, by country: various years



Analysis of OCED, built-up area and built-up area change in countries and regions.

So what kind of city is envisaged?

The following is in no way a detailed or even draft plan for the city. That comes next. The below is meant to give a flavour of what is currently envisaged.

The city will be built on a greenfield site, located to the east of Cambridge and will eventually house nearly 1 million people in 400k homes with 'gentle density' urbanism. Most buildings outside the direct centre will be six stories, like in Paris, Barcelona, or Mayfair. It will be built on 45,000 acres with 12,000 acres set aside for a new forest. It will be the same footprint size as Bristol.

At least a quarter of the buildings, including skyscrapers, should be made of industrial wood. It will be powered by solar, and small modular reactors. It will of course be fully 6G, and fibre connected and have a multi-line tram and metro system. Automobiles (EV only) could be kept largely underground, augmented by a last mile delivery system using smaller vehicles.



After 20 years, it could have a GDP of £55bn. This comes from unlocking the massive potential growth suppressed by housing and workspace shortages in Cambridge and Oxford. It will be connected to these cities via the new East-West train line extension, an extension of the M11, and Stansted airport.

But what really makes this city unique are the following:

- Speed of development – unitary body with planning permission mandated by Parliament aligned with modular construction for most buildings.
- Deadly combination of cheap housing and energy – with no planning overhead and a city owned, energy generation programme, this becomes entirely feasible.
- No pension or infrastructure liabilities for decades.
- The massive productivity from being surrounded by top-tier infrastructure.
- A place for physical experimentation like automated EVs, drones, alongside infrastructure planned for a 30 year technological horizon.

Britain's Millennials are crying out for affordable family housing. We're the country with the oldest and dampest housing stock in Europe, and it's generally Millennials that have felt the sharp end of this.

We're going to blow their expectations out of the water with the highest quality, four-bed, Passivhaus townhouses, all-electric, with an American style specification for appliances. And yet, these homes will be cheaper to buy than a damp, 60's semi anywhere else in the South East. The aim is for £350k per home. How is this possible?

Construction is cheap, developable land is expensive. We can eradicate the largest cost of building them: planning permission.

Energy

The city will also build its own “off-grid” energy solutions to supply power for its own residents and businesses via a combination of small modular reactors, solar power (on buildings and on its own land), and waste management. It's possible that the city also sells power to Cambridge and surrounding towns like Haverhill. This all becomes economically feasible when the planning costs are largely obviated.



Infrastructure and Amenities

It's important that the city owns its own infrastructure. Not just as a way of generating revenue from its own residents, but also as a way to ensure it is world class, and built to specifications. With public amenities such as hospitals, libraries and leisure centres, these can be run privately by the city, under contract, or leased back to bodies like the NHS under a PFI model. The same arrangement could be made to work with train stations and a metro system. Schools can be run as academies.



Artist's impression of a Forest City.



The Community Land Trust Model

The city operates on a very old ownership structure borrowed from the best of municipal innovation like the City of London, and Bournville. It's updated for the 21st Century. Residents purchase their homes but the city retains ownership of the land underneath through a Community Land Trust arrangement. When residents sell, they sell their property back to the city at the valuation of the building, not the location. Any land value appreciation is effectively nullified and can be passed on to the next generation of residents. This isn't about limiting prosperity – it's about making the city sustainable and therefore politically palatable to a vast swathe of the country who believe in equality and don't want to see a private developer or a lucky few take all the gains.

Ground rents from the appreciating land value and residential rents also help fund the city's social services, policing, infrastructure maintenance, and public amenities without burdening residents with high council tax or forcing future generations into unaffordable housing markets. It's abundance that doesn't price out the next wave of families seeking the same opportunities.

Starting from greenfield development with excellent urban design makes this economically viable from day one, creating a self-sustaining model that gets stronger over time.



Promise to Anchor Tenants

The value proposition to major employers will be compelling: this will be the only feasible place in the South East where their employees can buy quality family homes and maintain a high standard of living. First moving companies, research institutions, and innovative manufacturers will also be able to have their employees fast tracked to selection, creating further bottom up pressure to relocate.

Proximity to Cambridge provides access to world-class researchers, while purpose-built lab space and office developments can be delivered without the planning battles that strangle expansion elsewhere.

Top down incentives to relocate will also include regulatory flexibility to experiment with new technologies, and massively reduced energy costs. Furthermore, we will attempt to negotiate with Westminster a decade long waiver on corporation tax and business rates akin to Canary Wharf and current Special Economic Zones (SEZs). The combination of productive residents, cutting-edge infrastructure, and streamlined operations creates a unique ecosystem where businesses can scale rapidly and operate productively.

Resident Selection

The first cohort of residents will be selected via a number of mechanisms, but all fairer than the current basis for housing allocation; ones' parents' financial or social housing status.

- 40% – allocated to employees of commercial tenants
- 30% – allocated on merit
- 15% – allocated via first-come-first-served off-plan reservation basis
- 7% – reserved for legacy residents
- 5% – allocated via lottery
- 3% – allocated on a needs basis

For merit selection, we're looking to fill the city with Britain's most ambitious families – entrepreneurs, researchers, engineers, builders, plumbers, hospitality staff, electricians, teachers, architects, nurses, creatives, doctors, cleaners, developers etc., who want to live well and be part of building the future. Selection criteria will include professional achievement, employment status within the city, alignment with values of innovation and community, and willingness to participate in the ongoing experiment of creating Britain's most advanced urban environment. Early residents become stakeholders in the city's success, with input into governance and development priorities.

Covenants and financial disincentives will aim to exclude second homeowners and prospecting landlords looking to let the housing privately for longer than six months.



Who builds it and what are the timelines?

Designated in secondary legislation (and utilising long standing precedent from the Olympics, Canary Wharf and Milton Keynes), the city's development corporation will have powers of compulsory purchase, control planning permissions, and will direct the overall vision while subcontracting construction to established firms. The scale and longevity of the project may even justify acquiring majority ownership in a UK construction company to ensure cost control and delivery timelines.

Modular wood construction could enable rapid deployment of residential areas, with the bulk of homes deliverable within 6-10 years of ground-breaking. This industrial approach to homebuilding – factory-produced components assembled on-site – would dramatically reduce costs and timelines, while maintaining high quality standards.

Infrastructure development runs in parallel, with utilities, transport links, and community facilities delivered in coordinated phases. The modular approach extends beyond housing to commercial buildings, schools, and civic facilities, creating a comprehensive construction ecosystem optimised for speed, quality, and cost efficiency.

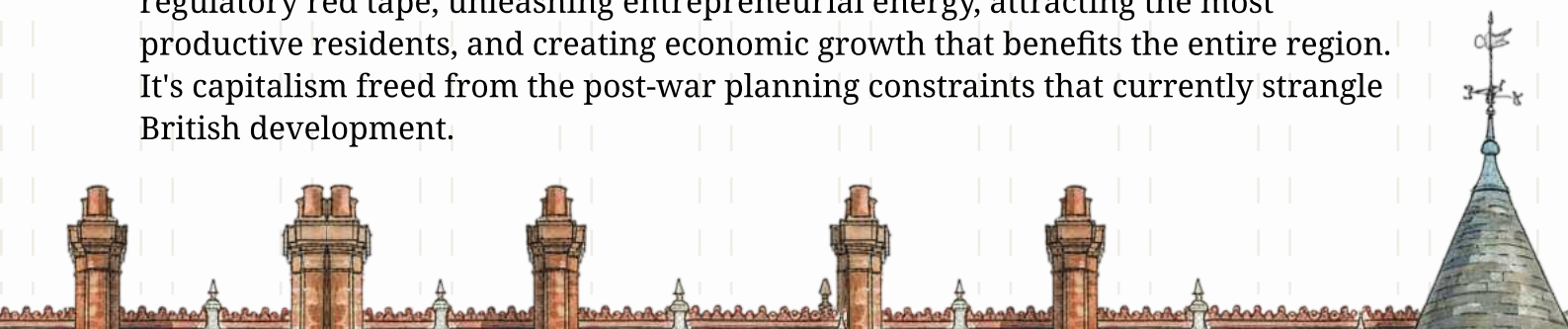
By year ten, the city reaches critical mass. Neighbourhoods have bedded in, businesses are established, and infrastructure is completed. By year twenty, it achieves the full vision of one million residents in a thriving, urban environment. It will have proven that abundant living is not only possible, but inevitable.

The Political Challenge

Building Britain's first new city in over 50 years requires deal-making on an extraordinary scale. Success depends on capturing imaginations across the political spectrum; offering something compelling to both left and right, while avoiding the trap of being rejected by both sides as too contentious.

For the left, this represents the largest public works project since the New Towns of the 1950's and 1960's. It delivers genuinely affordable housing, community ownership through the CLT model, and proof that private development doesn't have to mean private profit from land speculation. It's municipal socialism updated for the 21st century – public ownership creating an abundance of capital rather than fighting over control of existing assets.

For the right, it embodies market liberation via the SEZ designation by cutting regulatory red tape, unleashing entrepreneurial energy, attracting the most productive residents, and creating economic growth that benefits the entire region. It's capitalism freed from the post-war planning constraints that currently strangle British development.



The generational dimension provides crucial political leverage. Millennials and Gen Z face a housing crisis that traditional politics has failed to solve. A new city, offering top-spec £350,000 family homes, represents hope. Westminster offers only managed decline, and so this generational pressure creates political incentives that transcend traditional party lines.

Success requires locking in high-profile commitments from figures who command respect across the political divide. Backing from leaders who understand both the policy mechanics and the political coalition-building required – will lend credibility and cross-party appeal. Support from successful entrepreneurs will demonstrate that serious money believes in the vision's economic viability.

This not as a partisan project but a national necessity – proof, especially after the failures of HS2, that Britain can still construct astounding things at scale. We can deliver the abundant future that politics has promised but so far failed to create. It is about a wholesale renewal of the social contract. In short, this is bigger than any single party's manifesto. It's about whether Britain still believes it can build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.

Phased implementation plan overview

Building Britain's first new city in over 50 years requires methodical execution across four distinct phases, each with clear deliverables and success metrics.

Phase 1: Foundation and Feasibility (Months 1-10)

Phase 1 establishes the foundational framework for Britain's first new city project through three core asset developments over a 10-month period. The phase begins with creating Albion City Development Corporation Ltd and assembling a high-calibre advisory board and experts across politics, economics, construction, and finance, providing the credibility and governance structure needed for subsequent phases.

Simultaneously, phase 1 develops a comprehensive knowledge base anchored by two think tank reports – an economic feasibility study covering financing, construction viability, and economic impact modelling, and a legal and social feasibility analysis examining Community Land Trust structures, regulatory hurdles, and intergenerational fairness, supplemented by specialised studies on SMR placement, transport links, and resident selection criteria.



The coalition-building effort operates across four streams:

- assembling a commercial consortium of major anchor tenants and delivery partners, like Rolls Royce, Nationwide, and Arup;
- securing cross-party political champions through dedicated lobbying efforts;
- mobilising grassroots YIMBY support through partnerships with housing advocacy groups;
- and conducting local outreach to understand community concerns.

The phase operates on a six figure budget, with the ultimate success metric being the achievement of tacit ministerial support signalling government willingness to consider the project's most contentious elements, including Special Economic Zone designation and land option agreements, thereby providing the green light to proceed to the intensive £150m phase 2 planning period.

Phase 2: Detailed Planning and Coalition Building (Months 10-24)

This intensive phase develops the complete project blueprint. The detailed working plan encompasses financial modelling with multiple funding scenarios, comprehensive business case including 20-year fiscal projections, go-to-market strategy for resident recruitment, and city planning blueprints with architectural renders. Legal work includes drafting the Parliamentary bill, conducting detailed land requisition studies, and structuring Community Land Trust arrangements. Environmental and transport impact assessments ensure regulatory compliance while transport feasibility studies design the rail extensions and tram network integration.

Simultaneously, we continue to build political support through systematic engagement with MPs, local residents, and relevant ministers. Anchor tenant outreach secures agreements in principle from major technology companies, research institutions, and public service providers willing to establish operations. Supplier and contractor engagement produces preliminary MOUs with modular construction companies, renewable energy providers, and infrastructure specialists. The phase concludes with detailed cost breakdowns for all major systems.

Phase 3: Political Approval and Final Preparations (Years 2-4)

The lobbying phase focuses intensively on Parliamentary passage of enabling legislation. This involves coordinated campaigns targeting key committees, continued opposition engagement to build cross-party support, and public consultation processes to demonstrate community backing. Plan revisions incorporate feedback from political negotiations and regulatory requirements while maintaining core vision integrity.



Financial closure occurs through final investment agreements, government backing arrangements, and pre-sales to early residents. Contractor and supplier relationships move from MOUs to binding preliminary agreements, with detailed delivery schedules and penalty clauses. Marketing campaigns launch to finalise resident waitlists and establish the city's brand nationally and internationally.

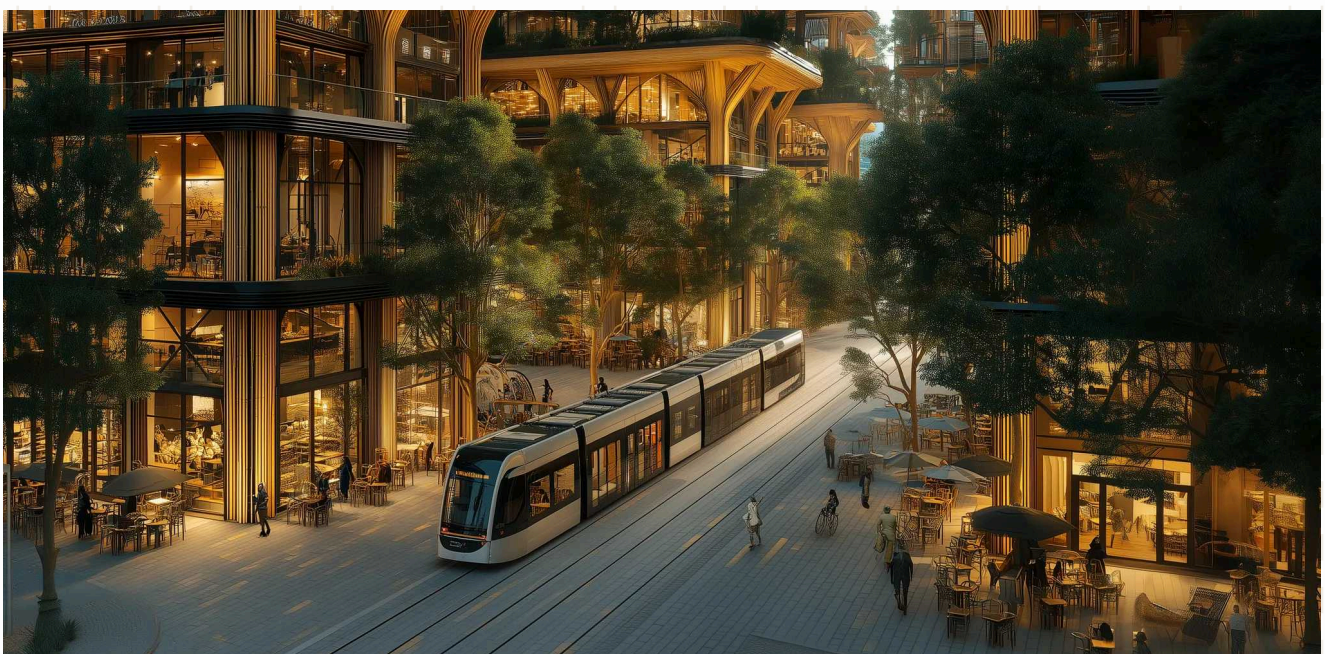
Phase 4: Implementation and Delivery (Years 4+)

Implementation begins with comprehensive marketing including off-plan sales to qualified residents, supported by detailed virtual reality experiences and model home exhibitions. Land acquisition proceeds through negotiated purchases or compulsory purchase orders as authorised by Parliament.

Ground-breaking marks the transition from planning to construction, with modular manufacturing beginning in parallel with site preparation. The phased construction approach delivers infrastructure first – utilities, transport links, and community facilities – followed alongside residential areas built in sequential neighbourhoods. Each phase includes integrated monitoring systems to track construction progress, resident satisfaction, and economic impact metrics.

Throughout implementation, continuous community engagement ensures resident input shapes ongoing development while maintaining the core vision of affordable, sustainable, and technologically advanced urban living.

This systematic approach transforms an ambitious vision into practical reality through disciplined execution, political engagement, and unwavering focus on delivering Britain's most innovative city.



About the authors

Shiv Malik is an entrepreneur, co-founder of the Intergenerational Foundation, the author and editor of several books including the seminal co-authored 2010 work, Jilted Generation: How Britain Has Bankrupted Its Youth. For a decade he worked as an investigative journalist for the BBC, Sunday Times and the Guardian, and in 2016 was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust to follow up his economic work on intergenerational disparity, undertaking the largest, multi-country, cross comparison work undertaken at that time, using the Luxembourg Income Study dataset.*

He currently lives in London and is co-owner of a small construction company, Building UK Ltd.

Joseph Reeve is the twenty-eight-year-old co-founder of Looking For Growth and the events company Future House. Via LFG he has successfully campaigned for provisions in Labour's infrastructure bill and also made headlines by kicking off an initiative to scrub graffiti from London's Central line tube carriages.

He lives in London and currently works for a British AI startup, Eleven Labs.

Notes & links

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