Changes in Urban Landscape

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The last 40 years have seen notable changes in both the surveying profession and the property industry. I have spent my entire working life in London and so it's not surprising that my experience is influenced by the massive changes that have occurred here – but London is not alone; many parts of the UK have seen significant demographic changes, increased diversity, and changing family structures which are all having an impact on the social and economic fabric of cities.

Driven by factors such as rural-urban migration, natural population growth, and urban sprawl, one of the most significant changes has been the continued growth of urban areas, with more and more people living in cities. For example, the population of London has grown by some two million over the last 40 years and now stands at around 9 million. This has led to increased demand for housing and infrastructure and has put pressure on the city's transport network and public services.

There have been significant changes in the structure of our economy, with a shift away from manufacturing and towards service industries such as finance, media, and technology. In London, this has led to the development of entirely new business districts, such as Canary Wharf and the Tech City area around Old Street.

Regeneration and redevelopment are two of the primary areas of practice for building surveyors; over the past four decades, we have witnessed several major regeneration projects, such as the redevelopment of the Docklands and the construction of the Olympic Park in East London. Liverpool One, Birmingham City Centre, Manchester City Centre, and Glasgow have all become thriving hubs following the transformation of former industrial or derelict areas into vibrant new communities.

Some parts of the country have seen significant investment in its transport infrastructure with the construction of new rail lines such as HS2, extensions to the Underground network, and the development of the Docklands Light Railway. These improvements have helped to connect different parts of the city and paved the way for the regeneration of entire neighborhood's.

But this development comes at a price; despite the significant growth in population and economic activity, many towns and cities have struggled to provide affordable housing for all of their residents. This has led to increasing levels of inequality and a housing crisis. The Grenfell fire of 2017 has taught us the painful lesson that numerous housing schemes constructed from the 1990s onwards were shoddy, with an appalling lack of attention to life safety and matters such as fire compartmentation, combustible materials, and poor-quality design.

Climate change is now a reality and has brought about massive changes in construction, with buildings now more thermally efficient and airtight than ever before. With a renewed focus on renewable energy and micro-generation schemes, buildings have become more complicated; the new technology does not always work; building users don't understand the systems whilst service and maintenance support is underdeveloped. Problems of poor indoor air quality and overheating are now rife.

Modern methods of construction (MMC) are playing an increasing role, with greater prefabrication, systems such as SIPS panels, and Cross Laminated Timber (CLT) becoming commonplace. Buildings are no longer built; they are assembled – the regulatory regime is playing catch up with the result that innovation can be stifled. We have yet to reap the benefits that MMC can provide.

Overall, the past 4 decades have seen major changes in the way in which buildings are procured; the materials that they are constructed from, and the standards applied to their construction. To satisfy demand, buildings will become more finely engineered, using materials and systems that are not always fully understood. As a result, the margin between the success and failure of a project will narrow, leaving many fresh challenges for the new generations of property professionals.

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