



Conversations on Future Lifestyles:

Talk it through. Make it happen.

Language of Urbanism – Sep 2006 Introduced by Rob Cowan

Hosted by Andrew Stuck, Rethinking Cities Ltd.

<http://www.rethinkingcities.net/conversations>

The word on the street: demystifying the language of urbanism

Ten thoughts on the language of urbanism

1. Success in planning, urban design and regeneration depends on professionals making themselves understood by politicians, by the public, and by one another. Perhaps more than any other language, the specialist languages of urbanism are heard by many people who only dimly understand what they are hearing, and spoken by some who find themselves using words and phrases they barely understand. People complain about it, but little is done to help us communicate better, and hence to build better.
2. What does creating better places depend on? Design sense? Political commitment? New ethical values? Yes, but clear thought and effective communication on these are impossible if we are ensnared by the misuse of our language.
3. 'Engineers have always baffled us with numbers. Planners do the same with words.' *Colin Davies*
4. 'We desperately need to demystify and express ourselves in very simple, direct terms.' *Peter Roberts, chairman, Academy for Sustainable Communities*
5. 'There are 10 central concepts of urbanism: at any one time at least one term relating to each of the concepts will be in fashion. Whenever a term goes out of fashion, at least one more relating to the same concept will come in to fashion to replace it.'
Cowan's Law of the Language of Urbanism
6. Terms come and go: renewal, regeneration, renaissance; urban village, brownfield, greenfield. People are expected to respond to new concepts without knowing the ideas and the history behind them, as if the principles of sustainability (for example) were either simple or new.
7. Every language evolves through a constant battle between economy and intelligibility.
8. The job of a dictionary is to explain how words are used, not to specify how they should be used.
9. Understanding how language works is a more immediate priority than understanding the vocabulary of urbanism.
10. *The Dictionary of Urbanism* and the Urbanwords website (www.urbanwords.info) have focused attention on our specialist language. The next step is to develop a national strategy through which we can work together to use language more effectively.