

Contaminated Land News – February 1999

This brown and pleasant land

The joint Institution of Civil Engineers / Forum on Contamination in Land (FOCIL) seminar on 27 January turned out to be such an inspirational event that there was little choice when selecting a topic for this column. The event was a follow-up to the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology report 'This Brown and Pleasant Land'. Why was it so inspirational an event? Because it not only answered the questions how can we redevelop brown land but also why - it gave a social dimension to the benefits that can accrue from regenerating urban areas that brought a sense of satisfaction to all the professions involved in such work in the audience.

The aim of the Seminar was to build on the political and strategic framework established by POST in their seminar at the end of November last year. It provided an opportunity for the professions to demonstrate the way in which their experience, knowledge and skills are applied to the management of brown land.

Sir Trevor Osborne, Chair of the Urban Villages Forum, gave an inspirational keynote address on which he shared the vision of the Forum. He illustrated the nightmare reality of the vicious circle of poverty leading to social disorder resulting in a flawed education system, the breakdown of communities and a growing sense of hopelessness with distressing accounts from his personal experience. The solution is a radical departure from the concepts of the 1960s - it is the urban village. The concept is one of mixed use development in which housing, schools, retail and commercial premises are arranged in close proximity to minimise car dependency and to nurture a community which creates jobs, develops social responsibility and gives individuals a stake in their environment - all on 'brown land'! It is not new of course - back in the late 18th century, Marylebone in north London was laid out in a regular grid with coherent but not cloned architecture and centres of economic activity. So successful was the pattern that it continues to the present day - all because of a desire to increase income from farm land and the imagination of a surveyor.

Griff Dixon, managing director of the only surveying practice specialising in contaminated land, summarised the present day role of surveyors. From humble origins in the 16th Century the role of the 'Surveyeior' has grown from being an overseer with a knowledge of castles and other buildings and of building materials, through Keeping the Maps of the land and determining The worth of coverings to the present day role of surveyors as project managers specialising in land and property. The Surveyor is always involved in land related projects and has the challenge of ensuring that the contribution of the many other professionals is accommodated in the value placed on a piece of land.

In my own presentation I highlighted the importance of the conceptual site model in risk assessment. The essential components of a good model are the description of the site characteristics and the dynamics of the physical, chemical and biological system, the plausible source - pathway- receptor linkages and the uncertainties in understanding of the above. This allows site investigations to proceed to collect pertinent data for use in risk assessment. We now have workable risk assessment tools for many receptors - human health, groundwater, surface water being the main ones. However we have much to do in the area of communicating the findings of such assessments.

Hugh Mallet of Aspinwalls identified the characteristics of good site investigations: clear objectives, a sensible strategy and provision for uncertainty. He bemoaned the variable quality of site investigations and summarised two recent AGS leaflets: Guidelines for Good Practice in Site Investigation and the Code of Conduct for Site Investigation, both of which are on the AGS web site (www.ags.org.uk), that show a way forward. He demonstrated how a well researched and interpreted phase 1 risk assessment, including a full review of the site history and a walkover survey, can reduce overall project risk and cost overruns. Unfortunately it seems that developers who have been caught out by underspending on the initial site investigation only to later pay out more than they saved have not learnt their lesson.

Lesley Heasman, of MJ Carter Associates and representing the Royal Society of Chemistry on FOCIL, described two forms issued by FOCIL to improve communication between consultants and analytical laboratories. The forms are desperately needed, and their simplicity is a tribute to the extensive consultation that went into producing the final version. They are available from the FOICL web site at <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scheme/research/LQM/Focil/focil01introduction.htm>.

Professor Judith Denner, of Parkman, considered the future of remediation and the civil engineer's role therein. She began in the past and pondered how today's landscape might have looked had 'dig and dump' been called the equally accurate but perhaps more acceptable 'total remediation solution', as German colleagues may have done, and 'cover or contain' called 'isolate and monitor', as the Dutch have done for many years. Then turning to the future, she reluctantly abandoned the premise that the future is female and suggested instead a paraphrasing of the civil engineer's mission statement as being ".to harness the forces of man for the benefit of nature.". This Copernican abandonment of an anthropogenic view of engineering is, in a Jonathan Livingstone Seagull way, the only way to ensure our success as a species.

The NHBC is expanding its Buildmark insurance product to cover contaminated land and more than just the footprint of a house. Alexandra Ritchie outlined the new Land Quality standard that house builders will have to work to on all sites. This will help ensure that the high standards applied by more responsible house builders will have to be applied throughout the 19,000 membership of the NHBC. This will go a long way to allay any fears potential house purchasers may have about buying property on brown land.

Finally Lorna Walker, of Ove Arup and a member of Lord Rogers' Urban Task Force, shared her enthusiasm for and optimism in the 'framework for success' that the Task Force is contributing to the forthcoming Urban White Paper. Their recent report Urban Renaissance: Sharing the vision summarises the five key principles for urban renewal: Design has to be flexible to reflect local, changing, needs; The promotion of compact polycentric towns; a mix of homes for the young, elderly, single people or families to provide a balanced community; priority to be given to public transport and finally the regeneration, and redeployment, of historic urban buildings. Her examples, from Leicester and Rotterdam, demonstrated the benefits that can accrue when the right mix of professions is combined with vision and courage - often of one person. The Task Force recommendations may be summarised as the need for design excellence in order to ensure social well being and thereby demonstrate environmental responsibility.

The combination of presentations on technical subjects with those on the social benefits that can accrue if the planning, architecture and social engineering are right was uplifting and a reminder

to the audience that engineering is not done in a vacuum - we are all, consciously or not - shaping our society. I for one left the event encouraged and uplifted that we were on the right track to something better.

The event brought together the technical and social ends of the spectrum that urban regeneration encompasses. Those engineers and scientists present were left with no doubt about the importance to society of the work they are doing in bringing with brown land back into beneficial use.

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