

## **Nobody's Fault?: Captain SUBR:IM's Nightmare**

**By Tim Dixon**

Captain SUBR:IM sat in a cold and oily sweat in the 'Robot's Arms'. His pulse was heavy and he was very, very depressed. He ordered another heavy metal cocktail, his tenth of the evening. Over in the corner he could hear the other robots guffawing and casting sidelong robotic glances at him as the 'Dr Who' theme blared out of the jukebox. How had it come to this, he thought? His mind began to drift, and the face of the attractive cyber barmaid became increasingly blurred....

It had all started last year, when that awful letter arrived telling him about the new housing development that was going to be built right at the bottom of his garden, on the beautiful piece of brownfield land that he cherished. The letter had come from the local Robotia Planning Authority and stated that 250 affordable houses were needed to house the ever-increasing robot population in his area. Nothing to do with him, he'd thought: it'll never get through, and besides he was far too busy acid tar diving and travelling the space-time continuum with those scientist friends of his at Sheffield and Cambridge to be bothered with things like that. How wrong he was!

Of course there'd been a recent planning inquiry, but by then he knew it was too late: the die had been cast. It was like being King Canute, and he knew his precious brownfield site would be re-developed. He remembered the times he'd wandered through his garden gate into the old industrial and quarry workings, and admired the rare bugs and invertebrates that seemed to flourish everywhere. Thank goodness for Buglife<sup>1</sup> he'd thought.

But he knew that the Government wanted to promote brownfield development, and he dreaded the day when all those robot families would be living on his doorstep. Crime would surely be an issue with those asylum-seeking androids flooding in. And what about security? Would he have to increase surveillance, would CCTV be an option, or would he have to move to a 'gated robot community'? Surely his brownfield idyll would be shattered!

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<sup>1</sup> The UK has 45,000 invertebrate species. Buglife, the UK's Invertebrate Conservation Trust, is dedicated to preserving these. Many brownfield sites are rich habitats for these creatures (see [www.buglife.org.uk](http://www.buglife.org.uk)). See also <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3653335.stm>.

He'd tried to scan his memory banks for more information; the same keywords seemed to keep cropping up but he was in panic:

**Brownfield:** Synonymous with previously developed land (PDL);

**NIMBY:** Not in my back yard (i.e. people who are resistant to change, but that couldn't apply to him surely?);

**NIABY:** Not in anybody's backyard (i.e. people who, for altruistic reasons, dig in, protest and try to prevent environmental damage from development, most anywhere!)

**Barker, Kate:** Author of recent report on Review of Housing Supply.

**Prescott, John:** Creator of Sustainable Communities Plan.

His memory raced...he'd also read the local press, and that was causing circuitry and shorting problems in his main processor chip. All that scandal about 'fat cat developers' and 'red tape planners' in the Robotia Herald. Was he in danger of caricaturing developers and planners as a result of reading this stuff? Surely not! After all, don't developers just want to make huge profits, hold enormous land banks, and aren't interested in developing brownfields? As for planners, don't they just sit around in all that red tape, taking an eon to come to any decision over planning permission?

But, if that was the case, why was his precious site going to be developed? With the brownfield and contamination risks, he thought, things were safe: why on earth had it come to this?

**'Was he in danger of caricaturing developers and planners?'**



**"Fat cat developer..." "Red tape planner..."**

Whatever else, he was dazed and confused. Who could he turn to for advice? Who could he trust? He decided to phone his nephew, Theodolite, who was very knowledgeable about brownfield redevelopment, and ask him some searching questions. What follows is a summarised printout of their conversation...

"Q. What did the Barker review really find?

A. The Barker review<sup>2</sup>, commissioned by the Government's Treasury Department, reported its final findings in March this year. The report concluded that Britain needs to construct up to 140,000 extra new homes a year if housing supply is to match demand. In 2001 only about 175,000 dwellings were built in the UK, the lowest level since the Second World War. Over the last 30 years UK house prices rose by 2.4% a year in real terms compared with an EU average of 1.1%. Lack of homes is a major cause of high house prices, which are locking many key workers out of the housing market. The report highlighted the fact that the housebuilding industry is marked by a reluctance to invest in brownfield and low levels of innovation. The Council for the Preservation of Rural England has disputed the findings of the Interim report, based on what it states is more recent Census data<sup>3</sup>, although the basis of this analysis has also been criticised.

Q. What's the truth about land banks?

A. The Interim Barker report had suggested in December 2003 that land is in scarce supply and that housebuilders ensure they have adequate supplies by using option agreements to allow housebuilders to reserve land prior to permission at low cost; or by holding land with planning permission (i.e. their core land banks). Housebuilders have frequently been criticised for using these techniques to erect barriers to entry and force up prices, but the Interim report noted that there was '*little evidence*' for this across the country as a whole, and that once the timeframe of planning permission and construction was taken into account, the size of 'core land banks' did not seem '*unreasonable*'. However, there is evidence to suggest that many housebuilders do trickle out houses to control production on large sites, and protect against house price volatility. Also, if the concept of Land Value Taxation is introduced this may have implications for developers holding landbanks.

Q. How does the planning system fit into all this?

A. Many observers have noted that the Barker review sees more efficient and effective planning as a key issue in making land available, and it's true that Barker focuses very much on the planning system and argues for greater certainty and speed in the process. There is a strong recommendation in Barker to allocate more land for development, with planners looking more towards 'market signals'. Refusals for planning permissions in major housing developments, for example, increased from 15% in 1996-1999 to 25% in 2002.

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<sup>2</sup> Full details of the report available from:  
[http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/consultations\\_and\\_legislation/barker/consult\\_barker\\_index.cfm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/consultations_and_legislation/barker/consult_barker_index.cfm)

<sup>3</sup> See the report, 'A Basis on Which to Build' at:  
<http://www.cpre.org.uk/campaigns/planning/kate-barkers-review.htm>

Q. How much brownfield land is there?

A. The government has a headline quality of life indicator of 60% of new housing to be built on brownfield land. The problem is the target can be fulfilled even if the amount of new building is declining! Also, the English Partnerships Brownfield Strategy document found that 69% of the 65,500ha total of previously developed land (PDL) in England and Wales is subject to either regulatory or market constraints, with some 16,500ha of long term, hardcore sites. This leaves 11% of stock available for development. But it doesn't mean brownfield land is running out! One way of thinking of it is as a bath full of brownfield which is being topped up with further brownfield sites coming forward (the CABERNET 'bath' model).

Q. What are the main brownfield risks for developers?

A. Conventionally, developers do not undertake redevelopment of brownfield sites for altruistic reasons! The external benefits of redeveloping brownfields (e.g. aiding regeneration) are not reflected in any profits that developers make. Brownfield is associated with risk and so 'market failure' can arise because high development costs can mitigate against development. Contaminated sites like the site at the bottom of your garden can increase the costs of redevelopment. In some cases, costs may be so high that the land has a negative value. As Barker pointed out, housebuilders' aversion to brownfield may be increased by market risk and site specific risk. The price paid for land for development will reflect the risks and costs of cleanup, if any.

Q. What would be the environmental impact if the development went ahead?

A. This is an interesting one, Uncle SUBR:IM. The valuable habitat could be lost and the invertebrates may disappear, but in some cases SSSIs have been set up on redeveloped brownfield. A good example exists on Canvey Island. More generally, recent research by Entec, Eftec and Hodgkinson for DEFRA suggest that £8.4bn of environmental damage would be caused to the environment by building the number of homes suggested by Barker. For example, 20% more carbon dioxide emissions by 2015-16; 50,000 mega litres more water; and extra waste costs of £1.2mn<sup>4</sup>. This reveals possible 'tensions' between redevelopment and environmental impact.

Q. Who's to 'blame' for all this?

A. A loaded question, Uncle. Remember Charles Dickens' 'Little Dorrit': nobody's to blame! But planners do come under close scrutiny in the Barker review, but then developers do as well. Ultimately isn't it better to provide homes for key worker robots, even if means you'll miss your strolls in the brownfield site at the bottom of the garden?

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<sup>4</sup> Full report at: <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/reports/housing/default.asp>

Q. Is it too late?

A. I'm sorry but probably yes, Uncle SUBR:IM. I think we have to bow to the inevitable. After all, the stark and simple alternative is greenfield development, and surely most people would agree the environmental impact in those cases would be much greater.

Captain SUBR:IM thanked Theodilite. But he was deeply troubled. He'd already strapped himself to a tree at the bottom of his garden to try and protect the brownfield site, but the builders were moving in, and the whole exercise had made him a laughing stock with the other robots. He'd just have to drown his sorrows at the 'Robot Arms' again...

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Ouch! That hurt. Captain SUBR:IM had banged his head on the metal headboard. What a terrible nightmare, but it was only a dream, wasn't it? He jumped out of bed and drew back the curtains in his bedroom. Thank goodness! There at the bottom of his garden was the old brownfield site still undeveloped with the early morning sun glinting on the pools of contaminants, but there, on the horizon, were the growing shapes of more houses being built by Cyburbia PLC in somebody else's backyard.