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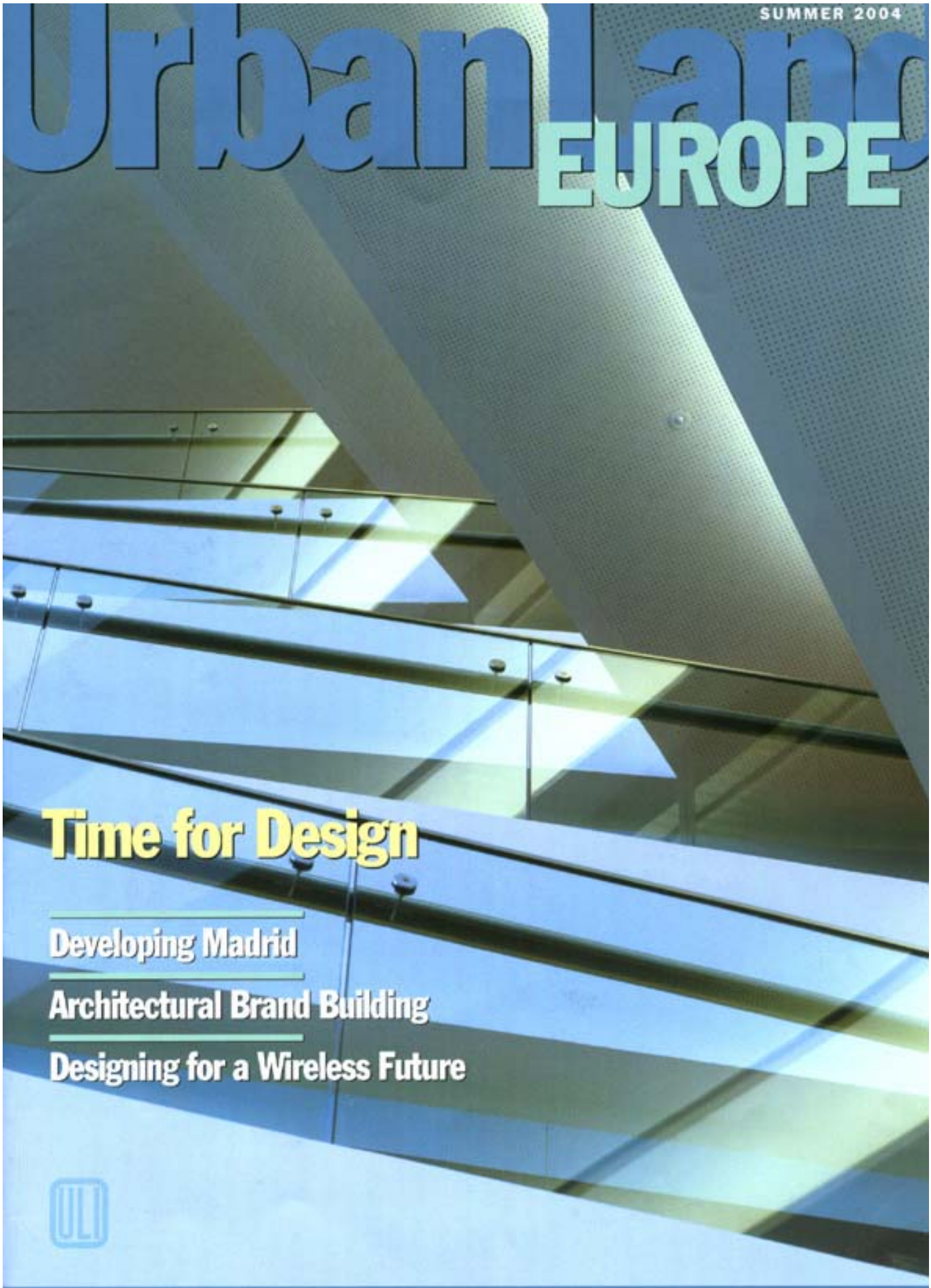

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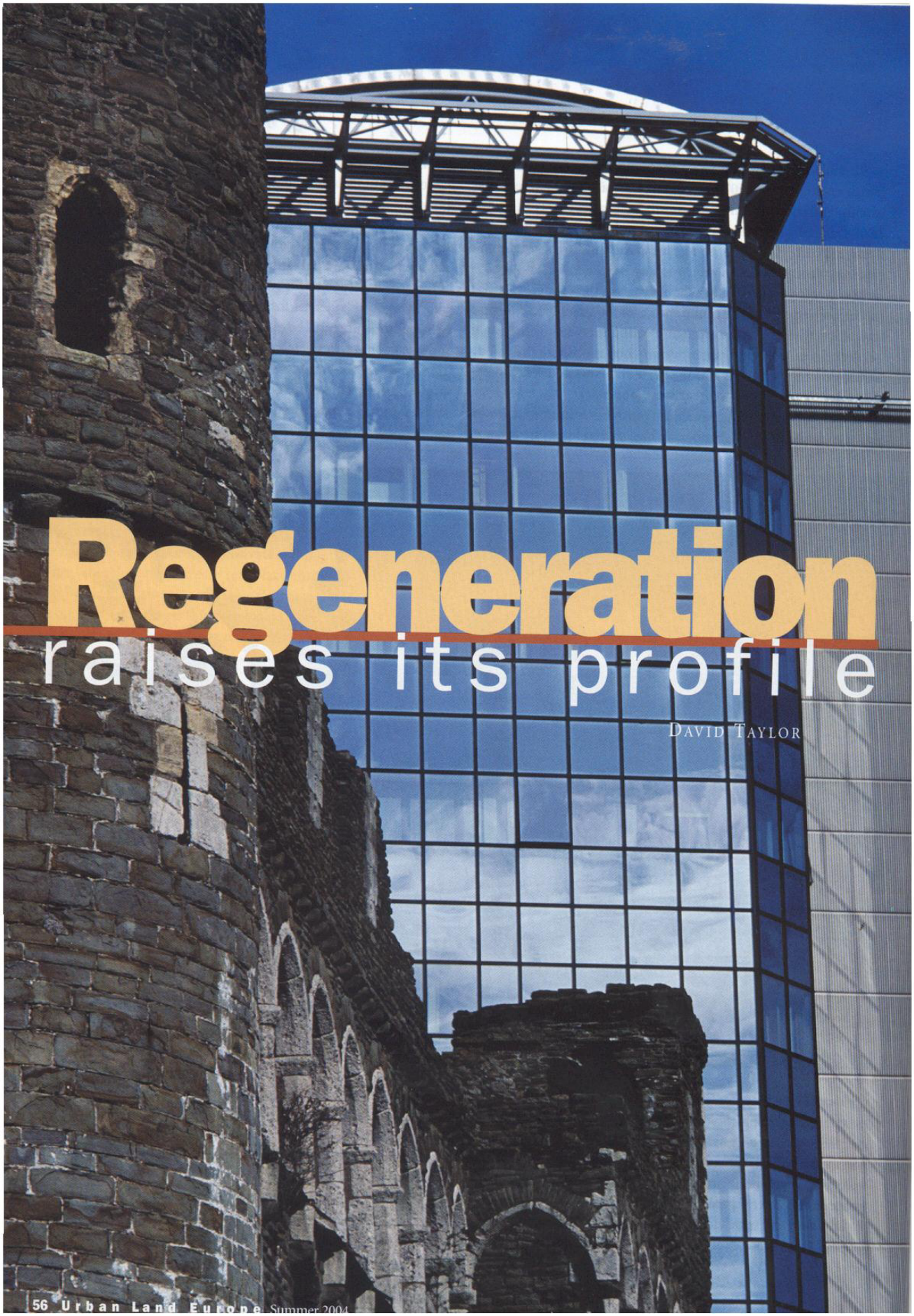

Regeneration raises its profile

DAVID TAYLOR

Roundtable debate examines challenges facing European cities.

How can we best regenerate our cities? How can the public and private sectors breathe new life into central business districts throughout the world and help to prevent urban sprawl, social alienation, and traffic congestion?

These questions, which come with no easy answers, and other subjects were confronted in a wide-ranging ULI roundtable discussion during March's MIPIM property exhibition in Cannes. Led by Old Mutual Properties and ULI Europe, 11 senior figures from European regeneration companies, consultancies, and institutions gathered to get a firmer grip on what drives good regeneration practice today.

Ian Watt, Old Mutual Properties managing director and roundtable chairman, began the discussion by asking which forces provide a catalyst for effective regeneration rather than more greenfield development and what he termed the accompanying "waste and destruction."

DENISE DEMARZIANNI

Guy Perry, INVI (left), and Andrea Amadesi, AEW.

It is a question of boundaries, according to ULI Europe chair Andrea Amadesi from Milan's AEW. "We don't have an awful lot of land [in Milan] available to continue expanding outwards and leaving disasters behind us," he said. "If you move too far out of a city, you're moving into another city. In Milan, if you move out, you're moving into Monza; if you move out of Monza, you're moving into Bergamo; then you're moving into Brescia. So we just don't have the available land to continue building something new and leaving what's left behind."

In Italy, the idea of living close to the city centre is still popular, he said. "People like to live close to the centre, and living outside of town is not socially accepted yet." Neither is commuting a long distance, he added. As a result, Italian cities have needed to rework their wealth of redundant factory areas to provide higher-quality housing.

In the U.K. and France, it is a different story. Government policy has driven a return to city centres rather than expansion in the suburbs, according to Christopher Armon-Jones, chairman of London-based chartered surveying firm Drivers Jonas.

"What happened in the U.K. is the government suddenly said, 'This is unsustainable,' particularly as far as retail is concerned. They said, 'This can't happen anymore,' and the retailers who wanted to expand said, 'Okay, well, if we can't expand outside, we'll expand inside.'"

Ian Watt, Old Mutual Properties. Aleksandra Zentile-Miller, Chapman Taylor. Rachelle Levitt, Urban

Armon-Jones credits the change to John Gummer, former Conservative environment secretary, who blocked future out-of-town retail development by publishing a parliamentary planning guidance note, PPG 6—Town Centres and Retail Developments.

Hence, some of the larger U.K. cities were motivated to start looking seriously at city centres for regeneration because as a consequence of the sprawl restrictions, land values were beginning to rise, Armon-Jones said. People who would not previously have dreamed of it were moving to live in the centre of Manchester, Bristol, Leeds, and similar-sized cities. "And developers and architects were coming along and actually building product which encouraged them back in," Armon-Jones said.

A mixture of urban housing emerged then that was attractive to relatively well-off people, accompanied by places where they could shop and businesses providing leisure activities that [illegible] new city dwellers' requirements.

This, then, was regeneration triggered by regulation.

A similar story is unfolding in France. A moratorium on out-of-town retailing has been hastened by concerns about sustainability and urban sprawl. And, though France is perhaps 20 years behind the U.K. in this respect, Armon-Jones suggested, French cities are starting to look at how they can renew their centres. There is one fundamental difference, however: "France has a fabulous public transportation network, and the U.K. doesn't," he noted.

Also discussed were emerging markets and how they will develop over the next 20 to 30 years. Guy Perry, with his company INVI, is working in Poland, Ukraine, the former Yugoslavia, and the Czech Republic with the mission of informing those countries of current best practice.

"We've been showing them what is happening in the U.S., U.K., and France today—not looking so much at what they [the client countries] think they should be doing, which generally tends to be what we were doing ten, 20, 30 years ago," said Perry. "So, in a sense, we hope that we can leapfrog—allow them to focus on regenerating their cities rather than spreading their cities out." For example, the client countries are being encouraged to allow development of retail centres only at subway stations rather than, say, at the intersection of two highways.

Spain is less of an emerging market, but Alfredo Laffitte, chief operating officer of Barcelona-based developer Layetana, sees plenty of these kinds of urban mistakes in his homeland. One example is Madrid, where sprawl is a cause for concern. "It is so much easier and cheaper to develop outside Madrid than inside," said Laffitte. There are similar situations in Valencia, Bilbao, and Malaga, but Barcelona is different because it simply does not have enough land to permit sprawl development, he said. For David Roberts of Igloo Regeneration, it was fascinating to discover that Barcelona, so often held up as a model of high density, had little choice but to be developed the way it was.

The introduction of regulations can simply force the market to find a way around them, noted Armon-Jones. But if one looks at extreme cases—that is, cities with the least regulation—the result ultimately is not in the best interest of developers, investors, or residents, said Bill Kistler, president of ULI Europe.

nd Institute.

David Roberts, Igloo Regeneration.

Caroline Lwin, Kent County Council.

"My formative years as an architect were spent in Los Angeles, which is a case study in sprawl and absence of regulation," Kistler said. "They're now waking up to the challenges that has presented, and in many ways it's too late to address the issues of transportation, of density. It's a much more difficult challenge now than it might have been, had there been regulations of some kind. There would have been constraints, which would have added cost and a challenge to projects, but would have made a more livable city as a result."

ULI president Rick Rosan, playing devil's advocate, proclaimed that regulations such as those driving the U.K.'s return to the centres never happen unless there is a "social movement of agreement." "I don't know if you realise this, but Los Angeles is one of the densest cities in the States," he said. This is not because, as one person suggested, there is simply no open space, he noted. "It's because there is no land—it's very much like Barcelona—whereas Dallas, a lot like Madrid, is just going on and on and on. The regeneration of cities in the U.S. is probably the most remarkable thing that's going on," he said, adding that such regeneration is far more common in the United States than in the rest of the world.

Among the examples he cited are the 5,000 apartment units being built in downtown Washington, D.C., and the 6,000 units going up in Denver, Colorado. Even Los Angeles is seeing similar activity, not so much because otherwise workers face a two-and- a-half-hour commute, but because demographics and social lifestyles are changing.

"I just think demographics, at least in the U.S., are driving so much urban development in a very positive way," said Rosan. "That isn't to say that 80 percent of all new development isn't still at the edge, which is a problem." But with the U.S. population expected to grow by 60 million people over the next 20 years, the scale of growth is massive compared with the relatively stable populations in the U.K. and Italy, he said.

What is necessary for good regeneration practice is not only a market that wants to regenerate the city centre, but also regulations that facilitate that effort, Roberts suggested. He added another factor: "To make the densities work, you need good public transport."

Infrastructure is more heavily subsidised in the United States than in Europe, Perry believes, because in Europe the developer has to provide the local infrastructure and upgrade the adjacent infrastructure.

"In the U.S., it's more of a kind of extension of a system and an addition to the urban sprawl," Perry said. "When we're laying out a 15,000-person community in Warsaw, infrastructure is probably the most important issue that we deal with every day. And one of the things I've stressed in order to make it economically viable for our team is that we have to maintain certain densities so that infrastructure can be paid for. That's actually a good thing. They [Perry's colleagues] were looking at infrastructure as a problem: 'Oh, it's so expensive.' I just said, 'Look, if we build enough units per hectare, this is quite affordable.'"

In London, the real problem is a lack of what Armon-Jones called "human infrastructure" in the centre—key workers. Nurses, railway workers, police officers, teachers, and others are being driven to the suburbs by the high cost of housing.

Drivers Jonas, in studies it is conducting on London and Paris and their respective municipal plans, is reaching similar conclusions for each city despite their distinct characteristics. One of these conclusions, according to Armon-Jones, is, "Without key workers, the place becomes a museum."

For Caroline Lwin, head of the U.K. county of Kent's regeneration and projects department, affordable housing for key workers is a major issue, particularly in the large area known as the Thames Gateway and amid government targets to build 200,000 new units in the southeastern U.K.

"The human element is really important," said Lwin. "When we talk about building communities, we're not doing that if we have the rich in one area and the poor in another, certain types of worker in one area and other types in another."

Mixed uses are also "absolutely vital," she said. "If we're talking about making high densities work, then there are other elements which need to be brought in in order for those communities to be vibrant."

Developers also should take into account demographic changes when planning housing. In England's southeast, single women over 40 is the fastest-growing demographic group, Lwin said. Overall, the U.K. had a divorce rate of 2.6 per 1,000 people in 2000, second in Europe only to Belgium with a rate of 2.9 divorces per 1,000 people in 2001. The EU average is 1.9 per 1,000 people.

"There's a huge increase in women who are solvent, with spending power, who are choosing to live in the city," Lwin pointed out, yet housing design has not taken such changes into account. "We still design housing the way we did 150 years ago," she said. "It still has a master bedroom, it still has a dining room—those floor plans have not changed. There is no other piece of technology where people would prefer to choose something that looks like it was designed 150 years ago."

For Lwin, one of the key issues is how homes are marketed in the U.K.—by number of bedrooms rather than by overall size. "What would enable more affordability, particularly in town centres, would be if you could buy your three-bedroom apartment as a loft, a shell, and change it as your earnings increase," she said. "What that does is it builds more stable communities, because when you get married, have children, and so on, you don't have to move."

Property in Britain is being seen increasingly as an investment, especially in such a boom period, with large numbers of young people investing to increase their earnings, Lwin said. "They will just buy a property and spend a bit of money on it and move every three to six months or year," she said. "It boosts their incomes, but it destroys communities. It destroys any sense of neighbourhood, any sense of social responsibility, and any sense of the home as being part of the street. It is a commodity."

But, while the housing market must listen to the consumer, affordability is another driver.

Aleksandra Zentile-Miller, director of Chapman Taylor architects, reminded the group that in the U.K., 25 percent of the units in housing developments must qualify as affordable. "Otherwise, there's no chance of permission being granted. Perhaps that's an example of a regulation which is quite good for city centre regeneration," she said.

Perry also noted correlations between suburbanisation and health problems. Georgia, for example, went from being one of the five healthiest U.S. states to one of the five least healthy within 18 years. Why? Because, Perry said, "It was very affordable for people with children to have a house around Atlanta, so they all bought a house around Atlanta, and now Atlanta is much larger than Los Angeles—200 kilometres [164 miles] across. But it has definitely compromised the quality of people's lives," because the sprawl dictates the use of the car, he said.

DENISE DEMARZIANI

Christopher Armon-Jones, Drivers Jonas (left), and Alfredo Laffitte, Layetana.

Those taking part in the discussion reflected on the changing nature of valuation, with more attention being paid to the lifespan of buildings and their outward appearance, and observed how culture revitalises the centres of its cities, though they noted that care must be taken to avoid creating cities that look like world exposition sites or feature "icon buildings" that age quickly. They also reflected on traffic congestion and its effects on cities, and discussed measures to reduce automobile use, such as congestion charges, and to alter attitudes toward cars.

David Taylor is a London-based freelance writer specialising in architecture, design, and property issues.