

brownfield

CONFUSION

So what is a brownfield anyway – and does it matter? Environmental historian Raymond Smith thinks it does.

While the construction industry may have a good idea of what is a brownfield site, does Joe Public? If there are big differences between the meaning of the phrase to the public and the industry, are they important? Yes they are. As part of society, the industry will often find its freedom of action is controlled by what the public thinks.

Not only do the varied meanings need clarifying, the industry needs to look at the ideas and aspirations which lie behind them.

To many people a derelict pig-gery or battery chicken farm in a Green Belt area would look like a brownfield location ripe for redevelopment. For anyone familiar with planning use classes, however, its agricultural classification would be obvious. Such confusion, though is not just theoretical, as a case less than two years ago shows.

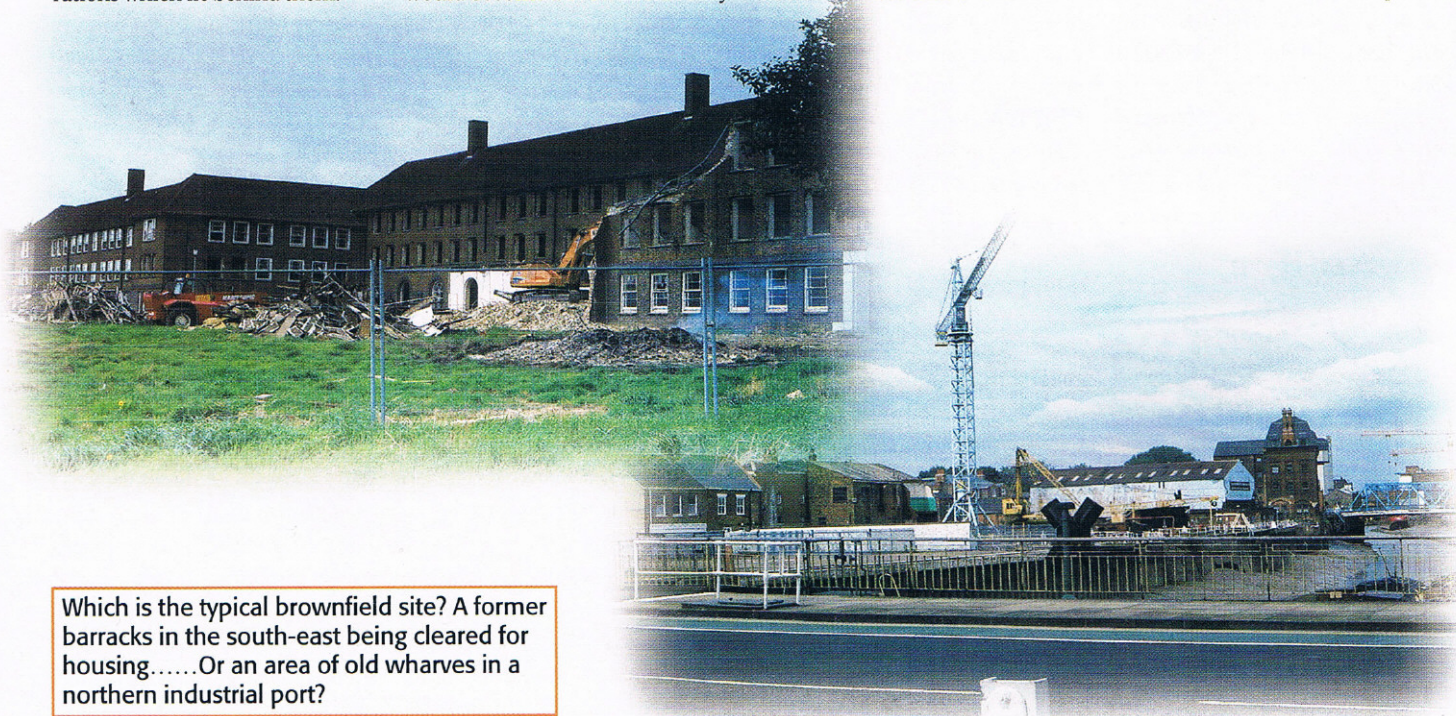
The owner of the grounds of a thriving lawn tennis club in a leafy London suburb sought to evict the club and raze the buildings. That way he hoped the site would become a brownfield ready

for housing development. This is scarcely the image of urban decay normally conjured up by 'brownfield'. After that one wonders whether a brown field is a green field ploughed up.

Here is the heart of the difference. For the general public the phrase refers to land that we have fouled up (at least) once already, and which we would do well to re-use before carving into any more countryside. They are not just thinking about the fact that the land has

been developed already, but also that it would benefit from a new use. Brownfield development carries a sense of regeneration.

Some planners have taken a dislike to 'brownfield' no doubt in part because of its ambiguities. One alternative that has been used is re-cycled land. Is this really much better? The recycling of land is not new. Some sites in the historic cores of our towns may have been re-cycled half a dozen times in as many centuries. Much of the rebuilding in the 1980s was, of course, the redevelopment of 1960s offices to cope ►



Which is the typical brownfield site? A former barracks in the south-east being cleared for housing.....Or an area of old wharves in a northern industrial port?

◀ with computers. Although the phrase may sound nice and green it is not specific enough to describe the process which the public has in mind.

'Derelict land' might better define the public idea of sites in need of redevelopment. But of course this has a long-standing fairly strict definition as: "land that is so damaged by industrial or other development that it is incapable of beneficial use without treatment".

This does not go far enough to include all the relevant land. If a site is in some sort of use, however damaged the land might be, it still does not qualify as derelict. Maybe the crux is the need to identify land that is significantly under-used.

This of course is the aim of the National Land Use Database (NLUD) in identifying "vacant and derelict sites and other previously developed land and buildings that may be available for redevelopment". In setting out their procedures for this survey, however, they did not once mention brownfield sites.

Richard Rogers' Urban Task Force (UTF) was not so reticent. Using the NLUD's inventory they have estimated the available supply of brownfield sites. In one of the supporting papers for the UTF consultants KPMG sought to define 'brownfield', emphasising that it included all previously developed land, not just that which was 'derelict'. Nevertheless their use of the phrase shows that they were only applying it to land that is effectively vacant. A planning officer quoted in the UTF's Interim Report, however, made a

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distinction between town centres and 'cleared brownfield sites' which were competing for development. For him brownfield sites were not necessarily derelict, but existing developed sites in town centres were not brownfield. Even among professionals there is room for disagreement about the meaning of the phrase.

But confusion as to meaning is not just confined to brownfield sites. It also applies to the concept of 'contaminated land' with which it is connected in many peoples' minds. Here we are confronted with a range of definitions. In 1991 the government's view was that: "Contamination is not synonymous with pollution". By this they meant sites that had nasties in the soil, but not necessarily enough to cause problems. This was a very inclusive definition. But by 1995 under the Environment Act the definition has been moved to the opposite end of the spectrum. Land was only described as 'contaminated land' if it was severely polluted.

When the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution took a look at soils (in their 19th Report) they studiously avoided this confusion by using the phrase 'contaminated sites'.

Contaminated sites might, of course, currently be in produc-

tive use. Provided that the contamination is not causing nor likely to cause harm, there is not the same urgency to clean them up. The difficulty is that many such sites are under used. Housing is the most sensitive of end uses in terms of land contamination, requiring the highest standards of clean up. It might be cheaper for owners to keep the land covered in concrete with a low value use for storage. If the value of the land could be raised the problem would be overcome. As John Gummer has argued making more green field sites available for house building is not going to do this. Clearly, however, 'contaminated land' will not describe sites in need of regeneration.

Even if we cannot be sure about meanings, we can still see that there is a basic problem, of managing our land stock in a sustainable way. This is the fundamental issue that the public and politicians are trying to address when they talk about 'brownfield sites'. This does, however, gloss over the core dilemma: most of the available land is not where the housing demand is. The Government seems to have accepted the shift in population towards the south east and is concerned with how this demand may be met. Even so, the UTF has pointed out that in the North East and North West

so much 'greenfield' land has already been allocated by planners for development that this will undermine attempts to develop brownfield locations.

A more radical approach would be to try to stem this population flow to the south east by improving employment prospects elsewhere. This would be a desirable solution on many different levels. Another approach would be to improve rail links to the Midlands so that commuters could enter the south east from further afield. This would enhance a potential natural diffusion of demand as people with jobs around the edge of the south east move into housing on the cheaper side of their work place.

Worrying about the meaning of 'brownfield' is not therefore just a sterile debate in the nature of language. Behind the confusion there are very real questions about what society wants, and how the construction industry is going to be expected to meet those needs. Even so, does it really matter that much to the construction industry if the public has a different idea of the meaning of brownfield? Well yes it does – if it comes to expecting them to agree to tax breaks or even enhanced grants to encourage the re-use of the land. ■



'Derelict land' is not an inclusive enough definition, while 'contaminated land' has definitions varying from 'not synonymous with pollution' to 'severely polluted'.