



GOVERNING THE UNGOVERNABLE

Deyan Sudjic, Director, Design Museum, London

The single most arresting fact about London is that it is growing. After decades in which, like every other major European and North American city, it was haemorrhaging people, the victim of the hollowing out doughnut effect, London has turned around. The forecasts now point to sustained and substantial population increases; much of it through migration. Something remarkable has happened here. A combination of an ageing population beginning to understand that the only source of the young and able-bodied that will be needed to care for the baby boomers in their declining years, and to pay the contributions needed to fund their pensions will have to be from outside, and of the booming opportunities for the highly skilled in everything from banking to the art market, have between them transformed the character of the city, and its prospects. The transformation is both reflected in, and in part the product of, a transformed system of city government for London.

Recently, London's only remaining evening newspaper carried a front page story to the effect that the first directly elected mayor in the city's history, Ken Livingstone, was so exercised by the thought of his legacy that he intended to run for office for two more terms so as to be able to preside over the opening ceremonies for the Olympics of 2012. The story does not have to be literally true to pose real questions about the impact of the singularly un-British approach to local government that Livingstone represents. After two or more decades of drift, and ambiguity, London as an urban entity now has a clear focus of power. It is a development that is the most startling product of Tony Blair's local government reforms. They were intended to change the face of all the country's big cities. London is the one success story of a reform that has elsewhere failed to take root. It should have been the most difficult, and the most unmanageable, and yet it has turned out to be the city in which a change of government, or rather the introduction of a government, has had the most clear cut impact. Despite his incendiary past as a self-styled man of the left, Livingstone is clearly now modelling himself on a combination of big city American mayors of the stamp of La Guardia, Koch and Giuliani, with a touch of the

imperial style of Francois Mitterrand thrown in, rather than the more restrained tradition of municipal public service. It's inconceivable that a Labour traditionalist would, as Livingstone has done, earmark £100,000 from the Greater London Authority's budget to spend on fighting a public inquiry to defend his personal choice of sculptor for a singularly lifeless tribute to Nelson Mandela destined for Trafalgar Square. Nor would such a figure ever have claimed that it was his duty as mayor to lead, rather than to listen, a destiny manifest in his decisions on everything from questions of aesthetics, to the extension of the congestion charging zone westward.

The intriguing question posed by Livingstone's highly personal, interventionist style of shaping London in his own image is personified at the most superficial level by the affair of the Mandela statue, and in a much more far reaching way by the eruption of a wall of skyscrapers which have been breaching the 305 metre barrier along Bishopsgate, encouraged by Livingstone's enthusiasm for creating Europe's first skyline to aspire to the model of Shanghai rather than Manhattan. How much is the jaw dropping scale of the capital's once in a century transformation the product of the imposition of a single guiding vision, or would it have taken place without it?

London has tended to shrug off attempts to tame and direct its growth ever since its townfolk ignored the attempts of Tudor monarchs to prevent the growth of suburbs outside its city walls, and its refusal to accept Christopher Wren's masterplan for its reconstruction after the Great Fire of 1666. Its rush westward was given a massive, and entirely unintended boost by the random creation of a heavy bomber aerodrome at Heathrow that later became Europe's largest airport. And the Great Lurch East of the 1990s, represented by the eruption of the Canary Wharf financial centre from the site of a derelict banana warehouse was equally accidental. It was the product of the market taking ruthless advantage of a set of tax incentives and planning relaxations, intended to have a quite different effect and encourage the growth of small business in the area. If one believes that London is a gently anarchic city that has always grown haphazardly in fits and starts, and it is that quality that is behind its long-term robust good health, then the interventionism proposed by Livingstone is either

irrelevant, or even counterproductive. In fact, the Mayor has produced a blueprint for future development that is as prescriptive as anything London has seen. It remains to be seen how effective it will be. Certainly London has had large-scale urban visions in the past. It was Nash's London that was heroic enough to inspire Napoleon III to remodel Paris, just as it was the London Underground that used to set the pace for the Paris Metro. The Barbican, London Wall and Paternoster Square were all the product of carefully considered planning strategies, at least two of which have subsequently been expunged. But in the last quarter of a century, London has got out of the habit of seeing that such strategies are possible, which is what makes Livingstone's blueprints for physical and transport policy seem so strikingly different from what has gone before. For London, it is the legacy issues that are really what the Olympics are all about. Learning from Barcelona's experiences, Livingstone is planning to use the games for the catalytic effect that they will have on London's bleak eastern fringes. The Olympics will be focussed on Newham and Stratford to help kick start London's eastward growth, in the attempt to find somewhere to put the extra 800,000 Londoners that Livingstone is predicting will need to be housed in the next two decades.

Development will be concentrated on Stratford, which will get the stadium, the pool, an aerodrome, hockey stadium and four indoor arena, and the 17,000 bed Olympic Village; the Lower Lea Valley that will be the site of the smaller venues. The scale of the project is massive, and will see what amounts to the total reengineering of East London. Depending on how you count the cost, it could be anything from £2 to £4 billion, once the games have ended and everything has been tidied up. As far as transport is concerned, the flagship will be the Olympic Javelin, a high-speed shuttle running on the cross channel rail track from St. Pancras to the Olympic stadium in just ten minutes. There are promises for an expansion of the East London line, the Docklands Light Railway and the North London Line, but not as yet any clear commitments from the government about the future of Crossrail. Nor are these the only major developments underway in the city. The area around King's Cross is just beginning to take in the scale of the transformation that is about to overtake it. The new St. Pancras station, designed to handle traffic on the high-speed link to Paris and Brussels through the channel, is just the first step. The huge glass and white steel box awkwardly tacked onto the back of Victorian St. Pancras will soon form just part of a sprawling development on the site of the railway and canal lands.

As one developer labours on a masterplan for a project that will match Canary Wharf in its scale, another has already opportunistically swooped in to take advantage of the possibilities offered by a shift in perceptions of the area that is already taking place. This is no longer an area dominated by the drug and sex trade. The Guardian newspaper will be moving into offices here. At White City, a gap in the city's fabric for most of a century is being filled in by a giant shopping complex. South of the Thames, at Elephant & Castle, the comprehensive approach to planning of the 1960s is being unpicked on a massive scale. This is a shift that is producing qualitative as well as quantitative changes. For the rest of the world it provides a unique opportunity to see the tensions and fault lines between planning and market forces, between a centralised vision and laissez-faire. For Londoners it's a giddy, dizzying ride, which once more puts it in the uncertain territory of a metropolis in the midst of the kind of change it has not seen for a century.

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