



LONDON VISIONS

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The basement conference room of London's new egg-shaped steel and glass City Hall, offers an exceptional vantage point from which to explore the explosive transformation of Europe's one real world city. Norman Foster's team designed a horizontal window that looks out over a ramp, down which glide a constant stream of skate-boarders. In the background is the procession of razor sharp glass wedges of office slabs that make up More London, the curiously named development that was also designed by Foster and Partners. Across the river, you can see still another concentration of Foster's work. The lowslung redevelopment at the Minories and, beyond that, the unmistakable silhouette of the Swiss Re tower – the 'Gherkin', London's most prominent new urban landmark. It is a new image of a city, a glittering, crystalline world as envisaged in the digital dreams of the computer renderers. And it suggests that, for better or worse, it is still possible for an individual vision to shape the form of a city.

The conference room sits beneath the architecturally overexcited council chamber that is the seat of power of London's Mayor Ken Livingstone. Wrapped around it are the offices of his officials and his advisors. Between them, they have formulated what, for post-1968 London, is an unprecedentedly interventionist set of policies on everything: from a new metropolitan plan to congestion charging and public transport investment, from business development strategies to the London 2012 Olympics. Between them, the Mayor and his advisors have created an institution as well as a landmark. Five years ago none of this apparently solid and permanent settlement existed. There was no mayor, no advisors and no policies. And, most arrestingly, none of these buildings existed. The stretch of the Thames from Tower Bridge to London Bridge was one of the many black holes in London's urban fabric: derelict for half a century since the city lost its role as a port. For decade after decade the site, on the edge of the river looking across at the Square Mile – London's financial and business centre, with some of the world's highest office rents – festered, disappearing under mud and wild flowers, while developers came and went, putting forward scheme after scheme. Then, as London emerged

in the late 1990s from the downward spiral of falling population and economic retrenchment, the endless attempts to find a new use for this land suddenly gave way to a building campaign that moved ahead at breakneck speed. Underpinning the surge in office demand – and the Urban Age conversation on London – was the raw statistical fact that London's job market and its population are growing: 400,000 new jobs by 2015. This analysis reveals a gradual return to population growth, a phenomenon not seen in the city centre for half a century. The growth is modest enough but still represents a highly significant turnaround in the inner city. It is an increase that is largely accounted for by the foreign-born, arriving to fill the gaps left by the dispersal of Londoners with families who have the resources to move, but who are not rich enough to compete with the globalisation of house prices in postal districts such as NW1, W11 and SW3, or SW1 and W8, favoured by merchant bankers burdened with £1m bonuses.

The Urban Age conference spent two days in this conference room, watching the winter sun move across the sky, trying to make sense of the forces that were driving this eruption; to explore their impact and their wider significance on the future of mature cities like London. The conversation focused on four huge sites each chosen as a paradigm for the issues confronting the contemporary city. Some are gashes in the city fabric, like the King's Cross railway lands. This area is currently undergoing a paroxysm of development that irresistibly recalls the coming of the trains in the 19th century whose impact on this very piece of land was so resonantly portrayed by Charles Dickens in *Dombey and Son*. Another such attempt at recasting the failed concrete utopia of 1960s, the Elephant & Castle project is a local authority driven attempt to use private sector investment to transform the shape of inner city housing. In the lost lands of White City, where scrap yards and caravan encampments straggle between rail lines and the ever expanding offices of the BBC, a consortium of developers is exploring the new shape of the contemporary workplace. The even more neglected acres of Stratford are the site for the controversial

development for London's Olympics, which will include a new town that will one day be home to 36,000 people.

This once-in-a-century explosion of change left some observers deeply uneasy. Others – many of them Londoners – were more positive about the sheer scale and pace of change transforming the face of the capital. For critics such as Anne Power, the LSE sociologist, this wild, thrashing, almost frenzied demonstration of the power of the market and a newly invigorated city and national government, is serving only to accentuate the ills of the city; to make the barrier between rich and poor ever sharper, to displace existing communities, and dismantle familiar landscapes. Despite illustrating the benefits of careful retrofitting of parts of inner London, she was prepared even to invoke the spectre of the burning Parisian banlieu as the ultimate result of this new kind of atomised, polarised city. The French riots of the hot October of 2005 gave her disenchantment a topical flavour. But the tenor of her view also took us back to the explorations of London's dense, urban communities conducted by Michael Young back in the postwar years, that he laid out in his seminal study on 'Family and Kinship in East London'. In those days, Young was lamenting the impact of redevelopment on the communities of Stepney, Bow, and Limehouse, and their enforced movement to the very places that Power now sees undergoing a similar process. At the opposite end of the spectrum was the triumphalist note struck by the screening of the video prepared for the presentation of the London's Olympic bid in Singapore in July 2005. This rather disturbing attempt to recast the cinematography of Leni Riefenstahl's Olympia in the multicultural clothes of a Benetton commercial was hubristically presented as a guarantee that 'it couldn't happen here', that an inclusive London would never follow Paris down the polarised Gallic road to ruin. The colour-saturated propaganda hinted at a London that was the sum of all hopes, and perhaps unwittingly portrayed a London that would continue to attract the world's poor and dispossessed. This duality was played out on the ground in the debates surrounding the city's own grands projets. The plans for a new King's Cross, the product of a team that includes both the leading mainstream modernists Allies & Morrison and the architectural fundamentalist Demetri Porphyrios, and a mooted new White City envisaged by Rem Koolhaas were the subjects of a more nuanced analysis. Underneath the vocabulary of the dense urban blocks, piazzas and parades of the new King's Cross, debate focussed on another reality: the intimate relationship between the urban fabric and its major transport intersection. The network of railway lines intersecting

below and above ground, including the new Channel Tunnel Rail Link and the underground, and the network of bus routes, make King's Cross the centre of a vast catchment area that extends well beyond the confines of a local community and its parochial interests. To the architect Nigel Coates, the King's Cross design would sanitise out of existence all the darker, shadowy, even dangerous elements that represent the uncomfortable, but authentic nature of the city. Richard Sennett argued that a scheme of this scale should seek to create complexity at ground level, rather than remain aloof from its context as visualised in the bird's-eye montages. For others, this was a wrong-headed even sentimentalised vision which had no understanding of the real aspirations of city dwellers. But architects and developers were robust in their conviction that their vision delivered the critical mass and character that would make King's Cross a place in London serving multiple and complex purposes and communities.

A less familiar model of what an architecturally inspired masterplan could offer a city was put forward by Rem Koolhaas in his proposition for White City, in which, almost predictably, he attempted to subvert the conventions and received wisdoms of masterplanning. Faced with a site bounded by elevated motorways, railways, walls of offices and tough housing estates, rather than create an inward-looking protected enclave Koolhaas' masterplan reaches out to its context with large open spaces creating east-west connections which offer the potential for integration. The resulting urban collage – unexpectedly littered with literal references to Soho Square and London's mews houses as well as L-shaped eroded skyscrapers – was intended to respond to a highly volatile housing and office market, challenging the very notion that buildings should be designed to be fit for purpose. A provocation that caused debate on how any development scheme – however large, resilient or ingenious – could play any significant role in determining London's future role in the global economy and its shifting labour markets. And indeed, on how local planning authorities could hope to impose such a vision on commercial imperatives.

Urban geographer Ed Soja noted that even the vast redevelopment of the Lower Lea Valley in East London would do little to change the fate of the economy of this part of the city. To his mind any of the large developments presented at the conference were insignificant set beside the larger reality of a de facto 100 Mile City, a London that spreads from Ipswich to Bournemouth. He argued for a more regionalist interpretation, that would have been familiar to Patrick

Geddes, to make sense of the social dynamics of a city like London. Soja suggested that despite the homogenising impact of the world city, there are still very powerful forces exerting specificity to counteract these trends. He reminded the conference that one of the things that makes London's government unique is its complex and problematic parallel administration, the City of London, an autonomous, hugely wealthy, free-floating alternate power block that is barely accountable, and has practically no electorate to bestow legitimacy. It is an arrangement that makes London an amorphous free form urban tissue that spreads in all directions, and contains within its jellyfish-like flesh two distinct brains. Livingstone with an electorate of several millions is the visible one of the two. The City of London has closer to 8,000 residents to cast their votes. And it has the sophistication and confidence to disdain the timescale of conventional electoral politics. In the 1980s, facing a threat from Canary Wharf as an alternative financial centre, it quietly abandoned its conservationist strategy for the city fabric, and pushed through so many planning consents for new office space that Olympia and York went bankrupt. Now the City is widely suspected of having struck a deal with Livingstone, a politician whose leftwing past might suggest they would have found it hard to deal with him. But in fact despite their very different views on social policy, Livingstone and the City seem to rub along well enough. Certainly Livingstone is as enthusiastic about building more skyscrapers as any developer. London's fragmented politics have not always suited it. Building Canary Wharf in an apparent fit of absentmindedness, before any mass transit provision was in place, was hardly good planning. It is a city that has a reputation for avoiding grand plans, or urban set pieces; yet it was also the city that built the world's first underground railway, and in which John Nash and his royal patron created Regent's Park and Regent Street, which were to inspire Napoleon III and Haussman to rebuild Paris. Its present, complex mix of plan and non-plan certainly seem to be encouraging its current growth spurt.

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