



## DELIVERING URBAN GOVERNANCE IN LONDON

*Gerald E. Frug*, Louis D. Brandies Professor of Law, Harvard Law School

The most significant crisis in current urban design lies not in our inability to design innovative buildings but in our inability to design a good mechanism for decision-making about what to build. The architects are way ahead of the lawyers, political scientists, and politicians in their creativity and in their ability to think through design problems. This is true not only in the United States and the UK but in many other places as well. I do not intend to discuss here the primary example of this crisis: the way political authority is fragmented in metropolitan areas around the world, including in the South East of England. I want to focus instead on two other problems of urban decision-making that apply across the UK and particularly in London.

The first is that we have lost our ability to figure out whom to give decision-making authority to. Neither the government – the public sector – nor business – the private sector – can be trusted to make decisions about the transformation of urban life. The instinct therefore is to merge the public and the private in ways that I'll describe. This sleight-of-hand about the public/private distinction has produced a second problem. It has helped guide the kind of development that is taking place here, generating a momentum to concentrate on building a globalised business environment, a comfortable place for the upper middle class to live, work and shop. Admittedly, in every one of the thoughtful reports issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Greater London Authority, the London Development Agency, and English Partnerships, there's always a lot of concern, expressed right at the beginning, about social exclusion, poverty, affordability, and equality. But given the current decision-making structure, building a city based on these concerns takes a back seat to building a globalised business environment. The first source of this policy is the collapse of the public/private distinction. Once upon a time, there was something called government, and people thought that government – democratically elected officials and their appointees – should have the ultimate responsibility for urban decision-making. Nowadays, government has gone out of fashion. It has been replaced with words like governance – along with public/private partnerships, stakeholders, and urban development corporations.

What's new in this new vocabulary is not that government is working with the private sector to accomplish its objectives. Government has always depended on the private sector for much of what it has sought to accomplish, particularly depending on it as a source of revenue and investment. What's new is that government no longer feels capable of being the decision-maker. It now needs to come to a consensus with others – with corporations, interest groups, communities, stakeholders.

Who are these people? Who is a stakeholder? Which corporations and interest groups are entitled to participate in urban governance? Who is included in the concept of community? It's important to recognise that there's no uncontroversial answer to any of these questions. It's also important to recognise that none of these institutions and groups are citizens of the UK. Only individuals, only human beings, not institutions and groups, can be citizens; only individuals can vote. Institutions and groups, however, can share decision-making power. That is, they can become stakeholders, participate in governance, and be appointed to the boards of urban development corporations. This kind of public/private merger is taking place on a large scale: in the UK, in the European Union generally, in the United States, and elsewhere around the world. In the UK, urban decisionmaking seems to rest above all on a single word, a word repeated so often on every page in every report that it is, quite frankly, overwhelming. That word is: partnership. Everyone, it seems, is a partner with everyone else. In London, the national government is a partner with the Greater London Authority and it, in turn, is a partner with the boroughs and surrounding municipalities. All of these partners are also partners with businesses and other stakeholders, and the stakeholders are all partners with each other. Community groups, trade unions, voluntary organisations, and organisations representing disabled people, young people, and gay and lesbian people – they are partners too. But not all partners are equal. The word partnership has a vague, feel-good quality. But partnership is a businessman's word. It suggests a world without politics. In the business world, we don't have political conflict. We have cooperation. We're all on

same team, working together on our common objectives, because we need each other. The government can't possibly finance the infrastructure and development it needs without the private sector, and the private sector cannot invest in major projects without the cooperation of the government. This structure produces public deference to business decision making in the hope that business will become more public spirited. The public becomes more private, and the private is expected to be more public. This merger has become attractive because both sides share a common idea of the city's future. The goal is gentrification. We should frankly admit it. If property values in a disadvantaged neighbourhood go up, the policy has been successful.

Given this vision, many of the other partners have only a secondary role. They need to be listened to, mollified, accommodated. Efforts are made to provide affordable housing, improve public transportation and protect public space. Sometimes these secondary partners make helpful suggestions that are embraced. But often they are seen as obstructions to progress, as a hurdle to be overcome. This lesser role is solidified by two different conceptual frames: the dynamic/defensive and the wide/narrow distinctions. Economic development in the style of globalisation is dynamic: it's on the move, whether you like it or not, and it's going to transform not only London but the world. Globalisation is the future, and you better get with the programme. By contrast, the boroughs, the trade unions, the so-called equality groups, are trying hold their own against this onslaught. This is particularly true of what the literature calls 'the community'.

The word 'community' is another vague, romantic word, with no particular meaning. But, whatever it refers to, communities are always located in a place that is local, narrow, neighbourhood-based. This is the wide/narrow distinction. The business-government alliance is dynamic and has not just a city-wide but a global reach. Community, on the other hand, is reactionary and is localised in a borough or a neighbourhood in which current residents are trying to stay. When one talks to the community, one goes to a neighbourhood; when one talks to business leaders, one can go anywhere in the world. The winner in a battle between the dynamic and the defensive, and between the wide and the narrow, is a foregone conclusion. It's a mistake to locate the poor and ethnic minorities in neighbourhoods and then to limit ourselves to talking to them in charettes. This frame makes them narrow and defensive. Within it, they aren't given the ability to

learn from others, to make alliances around the city and around the world, and to develop a vision for the future of the city as a whole. Only the public-private partnership is empowered to do that.

It's also a mistake to think that business leaders, along with the government, should be the major contributors to the definition of a city's future. Others have ideas too. If you agree, you might wonder, as I do, why Parliament required, as a matter of law, that half of the members of the London Development Agency have experience in running a business, and that the chairman have this experience as well. The problem with the language of partnership, then, is not just that it uses an appeal to consensus to hide the existence of political conflict over the city's future. It also has a substantive impact on city making. To alter this substantive impact, to change the nature of the city's development, we need a different decision-making process. Report after report has documented that London is an increasingly immigrant city, that there is an increasing gap between rich and poor, and that there's a problem of affordability and social exclusion. Do we have a conception of the city's future that makes these references to diversity, equality, affordability and social inclusion not just as problems but as an integral part of the city's economic development? Do we have an architectural vision of the city that makes these the foundational concepts for designing the built environment? These are big questions, and no organisational reform is going to work unless we answer them. But I want to concentrate here on decisionmaking. We need a process that transforms the richness of the urban population of London from being positioned as neighbourhood-based and defensive to becoming an integral part of the city's dynamic development.

To do so, we need to revive the notion of the 'public' in public decision-making. We should take the people of London out of the community and put them into the city. This does not mean business has no role in economic development; of course it has a role. It simply means that, ultimately, the decision-maker has to be democratically responsible. It also doesn't mean that we should slow things down. In fact, neighbourhood opposition and central government oversight are now the primary contributors to slowing things down. An empowered public decision-making process, properly designed, could speed things up through being more legitimate. Changing the current structure requires institutional innovation. On this score, London is way ahead of other cities. It already has many institutional innovations, and my proposal is to build on one of

them: the Greater London Authority. The Greater London Authority is a city-wide organisation, democratically elected. It could be given considerably more power by the national government to speak for the city than it has now. But the legitimacy of that increased power depends on its ability to incorporate into its decisionmaking process the striking diversity of the city population, and that, in turn, suggests a rethinking of the structure and duties not only of its planning agency but of its other decisionmaking bodies. The London Assembly, for example, has a very limited role, but it could be transformed into a democratic vehicle for formulating alternatives to the current embrace of the public-private partnership. Other cities, which start with different government structures, could redesign them with a similar goal in mind. We at the Urban Age often talk about the impact of a city's physical development on its social development. What I am emphasising here is the reverse. Social development should have an impact on the organisation of a city's urban planning process and thereby, on the nature of its physical development. The UK could take the lead in making this happen.

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