Special Issue
The London Plan 2000–2010: A Decade of Transformation

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Editorial


The urban development of London, the capital city and powerhouse of the UK’s wealth, does not result from a comprehensive unified vision, political, social or economic. It is instead a city of many distinctive parts that have become highly stratified socially and physically. A coherent approach to unifying London was attempted in the last decade, and the essays submitted to this special edition of City, Culture and Society consider those aspects of the latest period of urban transformation that were shaped through the new office of the Mayor of London.

Ken Livingstone was elected Mayor in 2000 by London’s large and diverse ethnic citizenry to unite the nation’s capital economically, socially and spatially through planning policies set out in the London Plan. Livingstone oversaw its initial drafting and promoted it vigorously. Subsequent iterations of the London Plan reflect debates surrounding its efficacy during the last decade, and the shift from a socialist to conservative policy perspective when Boris Johnson succeeded Livingstone as Mayor in 2008.

The changes that Londoners have experienced during the last decade were considered by Ph.D. candidates in the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in a seminar series convened in the 2009–2010 academic session. With the support of a selection of these students and prominent academic colleagues at LSE the seminar series was developed into six essays for this special edition. The first essay, by LSE academics Professor Ian Gordon and Tony Travers, sets the political scene in relation to the creation of the London Mayor by considering the processes of strategic planning in London during the first decade of an executive Mayoral system. They consider Doug Yates’ thesis regarding the un gover nability of major cities and London’s long history of conflict around metropolitan governance issues and invite the conclusion that this metropolitan region is indeed un governable, at least in strategic planning terms.

The next two essays focus on the London Borough of Southwark (one of 32 London Boroughs plus the City of London Corporation), a unitary authority with a long history of relative poverty and social inequality, which is set across the River Thames from the City of London, a generator of extreme wealth through banking, the unru liness of which brought this decade to a recessionary close and has left already poor parts of London considerably worse off. Cities Programme Ph.D. student Jamie Kiddee and Dr. Fran Tonkiss, Cities Programme director, examine recent processes of urban renewal and housing provision in London, led by market agents and shaped by the 2004 iteration of the London Plan, and considers Bermondsey as a mixed income and mixed tenure community so central to current urban and housing policies in London. The third essay, by recent Cities Programme graduate Dr. Suzanne Hall and Cities Programme academic Dr. Ayona Datta looks at the different ways that visual signscapes along an inner London street – the Walworth Road – produces particular types of translocal connections to different spaces and places that are physically distanciated yet symbolically proximate, and examines the ways in which the local multi-culture on this street is made and remade through these particular connections which are material, embodied, everyday and ordinary.

The fourth essay focuses on Tate Modern in north Southwark, a significant international symbol of modern culture and local transformation, which is a conversion of a former power station. Facing the River Thames and the City of London and St. Paul’s Cathedral, London’s historic symbol, this modern temple of culture links Southwark to the City by a new pedestrian link, the Millennium Bridge, and generates a powerful new public realm and urban axis. Professor Andy Pratt (formerly at LSE, but now at King’s College London) and Cities Programme Ph.D. students Corina Dean and Caroline Donnellan ask in their paper the conventional limits of urban regeneration in relation to cultural institutions, with their multiplicity of audiences. The legacy of urban regeneration is then considered by Cities Programme PhD student Juliet Davis and LSE academic Professor Andy Thornley in relation to London’s plans for the 2012 Olympics. They explore the process of planning for legacy after the London Olympics, and consider some debates and issues that this has raised in relation to land acquisition and community participation.

Finally, my essay with Cities Programme Ph.D. student Gunter Gassner focuses on the visual consequences of the London Plan and the attitude to very tall, mostly commercial modern buildings in an historic context. It considers the intellectual and policy basis that has permitted – indeed encouraged – the introduction of a new wave of tall buildings into central London since 2000, and highlights the subjectivity of visual interrelationships experienced.
locally in the context of the most highly regulated view management system in the world.

Through this collection of essays we are describing aspects of London's distinctive modern character, and highlighting very recent manifestations of the delicate balance that has see-sawed through the urban history of London (and British culture and society more generally), between authority and its repudiation.