



NEWHAM: Beyond Masterplans

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NEWHAM: Beyond Masterplans

The first meeting of the TEN Group's seventh session took place in Canning Town and the Royal Docks, thanks to John East and colleagues at Newham. It focussed on what kind of planning is needed to deliver results in the current climate, and how are plans to be produced that are sufficiently flexible without compromising quality. Part of the answer lies in different tools and types of development, and the Group also benefited from insights into how specialist developer Urban Space Management makes marginal projects work, through a guided tour of Trinity Buoy Wharf by John Burton, who also took part in the discussions.

A previous TEN Group visit to Newham to see progress on Stratford City and the Olympic site was when planning applications for housing were coming in too fast for the Borough to process them properly. At the time the Group commented on the danger that a flood of new housing over such a short period could create too much uncertainty for developers to proceed. A priority for the Council is to get better off residents to stay, and this means providing a better choice of housing in safe neighbourhoods. With the collapse of plans as well as major developers, progress will require quite different approaches until the tide of investment capital returns.



Boat trip from Trinity Buoy Wharf to the Royal Docks – view of East London University Campus

The visit provided some memorable experiences, as we combined different modes of transport. There were three main parts:

Canning Town area regeneration

We met first at The Place in Canning Town, which can now be reached very quickly from Central London, and the area is one of the largest regeneration schemes in the UK in an area that has traditionally been very deprived and isolated.

Presentations were first made on the achievements and plans for Canning Town and Custom House by Newham's Programme Director Helen Fisher and her Deputy Programme Director Karen Barke. A team of 18 are based at a new local office called The Place just opposite Canning Town station. A masterplan has been adopted for the 60 hectare site, which includes doubling the population. The vision is for 'a thriving sustainable community with an economically vibrant town centre'. The masterplan was drawn up by Dutch architects, and the overall scheme's investment value is £3.7 billion over 15-20 years. The

masterplan and financial model was adopted in 2007, and a Supplementary Planning Document in 2008. A panel of three master developer consortia has been selected to take forward the individual developments, some sites have been cleared ready for development.

However with strong competition for KickStart and Housing Grant funds from other areas, there are major questions about the pace of development and what is to be done in the interim. Rathbone Market, which is a project between Newham and English Cities Fund, will include a mix of 650 homes, a new market square, new retails and a Council Integrated Front Office. Fife Road is also ready to go with sites cleared and tenants decanted. Work has already started on a £24 million scheme to replace the dominant A13 roundabout with a signalled junction, which will greatly improve conditions for pedestrians in the town centre.



The Place in Canning Town

It was clear from the discussion that conventional masterplans are becoming obsolete, particularly in places such as Newham, where the Council owns so much land, and deprivation is extensive. Comments focussed on the scope for interim or ‘meanwhile’ projects such as community gardens and short life housing in areas undergoing regeneration with the idea that small things really make a difference. Neighbourhood management is becoming even more important, along with efforts to overcome isolation. Actions raised include:

- Support ‘greening’ projects that engage the community in looking after the neighbourhood.
- Improve first impressions and the experience of walking to and from the station and the most visible routes.
- Conserve and reuse ‘iconic’ local buildings that look derelict, such as pubs, possibly through transfer to community trusts.
- Consider relatively low cost upgrades to blocks of flats using coloured render and new entrances to change their image and improve insulation.
- Negotiate with short-life housing providers to take over and re-let empty buildings with agreements on being able to move occupants.
- Work with local people to build self-esteem and a new sense of purpose, making full use of local skills and interests.

- Rethink some of the prevailing design principles including densities (return to 30-50 units per hectare) and the use of perimeter blocks to recreate streets that would attract families to stay (as, for example, in Tanner Street in Barking).
- Reconsider funding criteria as projects to enable local people to grow plants and vegetables on prepared beds are very staff intensive and do not meet conventional criteria.
- Ensure the trajectory is right, which requires a far more flexible approach (see later discussion).
- Take the long-term view.

Trinity Buoy Wharf creative business centre

Progress in a recession will require new types of scheme and developer. A short minibus ride across the mouth of the River Lea brought the Group to Trinity Buoy Wharf, the former base for building and maintaining the buoys and lightships used to protect shipping. Like much of East London, there are still fascinating corners that are hard to reach because of the jungle of roads and railways, electricity pylons and waterways. Such a property has little appeal to the conventional property occupier or developer, and as a result, is often left to decay.

Yet despite, and in part because of the isolated location, the buildings have been brought back to life by Urban Space Management as low cost workspace. This has been supplemented by two of the first ‘container cities’ to provide 80,000 sq ft of space in all, where some 400 people now work. The project owes its existence to an inspired deal between the Docklands Development Corporation, who transferred a long lease to the Trinity Buoy Wharf, with a management agreement with Urban Space Management, whereby 25% of the income goes to a Trust to support local arts activities. Their approach to ‘in-between spaces’ offers a possible alternative to relying on comprehensive development, along with new financial mechanisms to raise private finance for infrastructure, for example through Tax Increment Finance.



Container city

The discussion explored how to make alternative forms of development viable, and a number of key factors for success were brought out:

- Original ownership by a public agency and willingness to work with a specialist arts oriented developer (rather than seeking the highest offer).

- Innovative and far-sighted property agreement that avoided seeking the maximum value from the site but recognised the importance of a balance of activities to generate life.
- Imaginative restoration and reuse of a group of buildings with a rich history and special character that would appeal to designers (if not necessary councillors!).



A 'diner' provides cafe

- Large enough property to enable intensive on site management and attract a cluster of creative people (rather than artists who tend not to be use the space so actively).
- Provision of a range of spaces, including live work units and different size spaces, and with enough activity now to support a café.
- Use of containers to provide low cost space in response to demand thanks to low building costs at the time (£37 a sq ft was all that could be financed out of rents).
- Imaginative landscaping using historic artefacts and interpretation boards, and with a strong creative element throughout e.g. permanent music playing in a lighthouse.

River trip to Newham's offices in the Royal Albert Dock

The final leg was a memorable trip in two small boats, which grappled with cloudbursts and a falling tide to take us down river past the Woolwich Barrier and into the Royals via the modern lock that the LDDC installed. During the short trip we saw some of the huge amounts of housing that has been built in blocks of flats, including at Woolwich Arsenal and Thamesmead,



and some of the wharves still to be developed. But the overall feeling was of a vast and underused space, with almost no activity on the water to give East London a new meaning or sense of purpose or cohesion. The reason became apparent when one of the boats ran aground on a sand bank reminding us of the tidal nature of the Thames (unlike comparable areas in Amsterdam and Rotterdam or Hamburg).



As a result water in this part of London continued to be a barrier to movement rather than an asset that adds value to properties.

We saw some major projects have taken place, such as the building of the University of East London, which occupies half of one side of the Royal Albert Dock. City Airport on the other side is very busy, and there is a substantial marina. Nearby is the Excel conference and exhibition centre, which is still expanding. However in general, despite huge investments of public funds on land assembly, clearance and remediation, plus infrastructure, and no less than 71 masterplans, mobilising private investment has proved very difficult.



With a new team and a new approach that takes account of economic realities, Newham's officers are seeking to put a different form of planning into practice. A great example of this has been how the German manufacturing giant Siemens' interest in establishing a shop window in London is being turned into a real project in a remarkably short time. Following a chance discussion with Mayor Boris Johnson, Newham has negotiated an agreement to develop a site next to the Council's office into what will be a visitor attraction, displaying both Siemens products and engineering advances.

The key has been the use of a Planning Performance Agreement (which Siemens funded at a cost of £12,000), which is transferring just the footprint of the site, for a consideration, which is being invested in upgrading the public realm all around, and which will leave Newham Council with the ownership of the building, and hence control over what happens in the longer term.

Safely back in Newham's fine new offices, which took over a speculatively built office block that had been empty for some years, and directly opposite the runway of City Airport, we considered the overall lessons from our visit for planning. While a number of different views were expressed, a number of principles emerged which might apply more widely to development in the economic 'ice age' we may be in for. Member's views are welcome, as the principles could be developed as a TEN manifesto, with examples from other visits, if there was sufficient interest.



View from Newham Council's
 new offices

Beyond masterplans

The following set of ten principles each with four elements, has been influenced both by the discussion in Newham and elsewhere, including the lessons from Dutch approaches to planning and development:

1. Focus on strategic locations

- a. **Exploit high accessibility** The places with most long-term development potential are those that are easiest to reach by more than one mode. Where accessibility has been upgraded through public investment, as in Canning Town, it makes economic sense to promote higher density development, and to overcome any barriers.
- b. **Pool land** Even where the public sector owns most of the land, it will be beneficial to work at a scale that will transform how the place is seen (over 10 ha?) Sites then can be broken up into manageable parcels (1-2 ha) that can marketed to a range of developers.
- c. **Raise local ambitions** Communities need to be engaged, not just consulted, and this means recognising the time it will take to deliver benefits. There also need to be some early ‘mutual benefits’ that will improve the local environment, such a community gardens.
- d. **Avoid distractions** Schemes that are over-dependant on major investments that may never happen are to be avoided in favour of those that extend what has already been achieved. This means local authorities taking the lead in identifying the strategic priorities, not simply responding to developers.

2. Commission development frameworks not rigid masterplans

- a. **Respond to economic realities** The starting point should be what is likely to be feasible over the longer-term, not what would look exciting. Plans need to be flexible as well as inspiring.
- b. **Set out key principles (charters not design codes)** In order to see the ‘big picture, it is vital to go beyond goals that could apply anywhere to principles that are appropriate to the location. Design codes can be too specific, when what matters is the general principles for the elements that make up the masterplan
- c. **Allow for flexibility in phasing** The fundamentals of patterns of movement and street design may not change, and plot ratios and building heights need to be fixed. However uses can change quire radically without losing the overall vision.
- d. **Encouraging a multiplicity of developers/designers** The best places have evolved organically not comprehensively. A variety of designs helps give a place ‘soul’ and enables it to appeal to different market segments.

3. Build places not icons

- a. **Creating a hierarchy of linked streets** New places should be easy to find ones way round without recourse to maps. While they should not be dominated by through

traffic’, one of the main goals of planning should be to ‘tame cars’ not eliminate them.

- b. Making walking and cycling attractive** Creating places that feel safe, and where people live out of choice not necessity, means getting the network right, and avoiding wasting resources on unnecessarily materials
- c. Simplifying design** Costs can be cut, without affecting value, by avoiding over-complex and unproven approaches, and repeating what seems to work, such as perimeter blocks of family housing
- d. Using new tools e.g. competitions, quality panels** Instead of trying to specify too much through over-complex agreements, new ways of thinking can be achieved through architect developer competitions, and by using outside experts as ‘critical friends’.

4. Create confidence through the public realm

- a. Safeguard heritage assets** Where buildings lie empty and become derelict, they create a sense of depression, and can lead to a spiral of decay. Hence an early priority should be to mothball and facelift prominent buildings that have strong associations.
- b. Green derelict land** Landscaping is relatively cheap, and in the time taken to negotiate agreements, saplings can become trees. Uses such as community gardens and allotments makes places look cared for, as well as engaging communities in a positive way.
- c. Use events to generate interest** While most of the time places may seem lifeless, the occasional arts festival or sporting activity can change both local views and also the image that an area holds for the wider community.
- d. Work with creative people** Creative businesses, like designers, as well as artists, may move into areas that others would avoid. In the process they can help change the image and provide an important source of positive energy. Public realm commissions can be a good way of putting creative ideas into action.

5. Make deals not plans

- a. Be open to offers** A good development framework helps build interest, and also enables the local authority to respond quickly to any interest. As there are few developers left able to promote and implement a mixed use scheme, the local authority should be able to judge when a proposal is appropriate. Panels of well-established developers can help, but small entrepreneurs also need to be given a chance.
- b. Respond opportunistically** When a good proposal comes along, it is vital to respond quickly as there will be many competing alternatives. Examples like Tate Modern show the importance of knowing when a proposal is appropriate; while the

long conflict over the development of the Globe Theatre show how easy it is to get it wrong.

- c. **Use Performance Planning Agreements to speed delivery** By agreeing how an application is to be handled, the time and risks can be greatly reduced. There is now an established process to provide a framework and timetable.
- d. **Negotiate imaginatively** Instead of having fixed ideas on what will be appropriate, it is important to reach agreements that will both help implement the long-term vision, and be viable for the investors.

6. Take a ride together

- a. **Harness long-term finance** To make major projects viable, where new infrastructure is required, it is important to find ways of tapping lower cost and longer-term debt finance from insurance companies and pension funds. This may include the use of bonds and Tax Increment Finance.
- b. **Use Joint Venture Companies** A practical way of avoiding the adversarial approach is to set up Public Private Partnerships. These could be for a particular site or project.
- c. **Use public land as equity** Where the public sector owns land, it may often be best to take a longer-term return after the area has been transformed.
- d. **Pick the right partner(s)** The time it takes to transform an area means that just like a marriage, it is vital to pick partners that have similar interests and can work together.

7. Catch the tide

- a. **Understand market trends** Instead of starting with what would look good, it is important to ask who is most likely to occupy the space, given all the alternative locations that are possible. This is not just about extrapolating what has happened in the past, but rather appreciating both demand and supply.
- b. **Anticipate possible futures** The huge changes that have taken place over the last twenty or thirty years mean that behaviour could change quite fundamentally, for example as a result of the rise of India as a world power, or the effect of a doubling in energy prices.
- c. **Be flexible about uses** As the only certain fact is that the future is unpredictable, local authorities need to be able to adapt without losing the original vision.
- d. **Avoid compromising on quality** The pressure is always on to cut investment, and rather than losing quality, it is better to consider what public benefits might be sacrificed in order that development takes places at all.

8. Negotiate from strength

- a. **Concentrate where change is possible** A more flexible set of plans means giving more discretion to the local authority. To make this possible it is vital to set priorities in terms of where development is being sought, and where it is being resisted.
 - b. **Avoid adversarial situations** The British system has been relatively wasteful, as so much time (and money) is spent on legalistic enquiries rather than problem solving together.
 - c. **Use project teams** If a more collaborative approach is to be achieved, it will involve backing up chief officers with people who understand all the key elements, particularly development economics.
9. **Employ multi-disciplinary staff**
- a. **Use consultants wisely** Far too much has been spent commissioning reports that quickly become obsolete, and too little on simply learning what is most likely to work.
 - b. **Build neighbourhood teams** The expertise that a consultant brings can be multiplied many times by ensuring that different services come together, for example by working in neighbourhood offices.
 - c. **Support learning** The full benefits of having people with different backgrounds working together will only come from investing in training, including the chance to share experience with other places.
 - d. **Provide a mix of tasks** Interest can be maintained by enabling staff to work on immediate projects as well as longer-term plans.
10. **Start small**
- a. **Tackle local grievances** Nothing succeeds like success and so it is important to have a budget to tackle local concerns without having to depend on grand schemes that may not materialise.
 - b. **Find 'easy wins'** Consequently the development framework must include pilot projects as well as flagship schemes.
 - c. **Celebrate success** Events that help build morale and communicate achievements need to be properly funded as they are as important as any planning study.
 - d. **Accept realistic timescales** Regeneration can take a generation, and so it is silly to expect short-term appointments to deliver lasting change. However through going beyond masterplans with luck it should be possible for the initial investment to more than pay off over 10-20 years.

Appendix A

Participants and apologies

Participants

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