



Summary of the second meeting in the fourth series of TEN

Abbott's Wharf, Tower Hamlets 31st May 2007

Produced by

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Present

Andrew Armes, Head of Development and Design, Milton Keynes Council
Patricia Charleton, Principal Planner, Transport for London
Chris Donovan, Assistant Director (Strategy, Planning & Regeneration), Bexley Council
Marc Dorfman, Chief Planning Officer, LB Redbridge
Sue Foster, Head of Planning and Land Charges, LB Hackney
David Hennings, Director of Strategic Planning, Haringey Council
Tom Jeffrey, Director of Environment and Leisure, LB Sutton
Seema Manchanda, Head of Physical Regeneration and Development, Newham Council
Owen Whalley, Head of Major Project Development, LB Tower Hamlets
Bob West, Service Manager, Culture and Environment, Camden Council

Nicholas Falk, URBED
Anne Wyatt, URBED

Apologies

Paul Evans, Strategic Director of Regeneration, Southwark Council
Pat Hayes, Executive Director of Regeneration and Housing, Ealing Council
Shifa Mustafa, Assistant Director of Planning and Environmental Control, Haringey Council
Robert Scourfield, Interim Director for Culture and Environment, Camden Council
Brendan Walsh, Director of Regeneration and Community Development, Ealing Council
Camilla Ween, Interim Head of Land Use Planning, Transport for London

The second TEN group meeting of the fourth series kicked off with a visit to Abbott's Wharf on the Limehouse Cut, followed by a discussion in Bromley Hall, a restored 15th century building on the A12. Geoff Pearce, Group Director of Development and Asset Management at the East Thames Group gave us a guided tour of Abbott's Wharf and answered the group's questions. A few members ended up enjoying the extensive, and highly populated public realm at Canary Wharf and West India Dock. TEN welcomed Owen Whalley, Head of Major Project Development, at Tower Hamlets who kindly hosted the meeting, and Sue Foster, Head of Planning and Land Charges, at Hackney bringing the group to 12. Sue Foster has kindly offered to host a future meeting that will possibly look at the topic of Buy to Let.

Briefing was circulated in advance including a summary of an earlier report by Helen Cope, *Capital Gains: making high density housing work in London*, a case study produced by CABE, and a profile of Abbot's Wharf by the East Thames Group.

TEN is grateful to Geoff Pearce for giving up his time to show the group around Abbott's Wharf and to Tower Hamlets for hosting the meeting.

Bridging the gaps in Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets has suffered in the past from high levels of deprivation, coupled with low levels of connectivity as a result of its tangle of roads, railways and waterways. It is now experiencing explosive housing growth, coupled with the pressures of accommodating the Olympics. Mega projects such as Canary Wharf have boosted London's prosperity by enabling the City to grow and compete with the World. Some of the new buildings, such as in Limehouse Basin are very exciting pieces of architecture. Abbott's Wharf in particular looks Continental, and recent buildings are much more exciting than those of only ten years ago.

The experience of riding the Docklands Light Railway and walking around Canary Wharf also compares well with any major international City. There is a definite buzz in the air, which makes the location attractive to young people. The problem is in the widening divide between the new economy and the surrounding residents. There is also a problem of how to build neighbourhoods, rather than just offices and homes. Prices have been driven up through demand for Buy to Let, and so the foundations of some of the bigger schemes could be shaky if confidence were to fall, for example if interest rates rise.

People's quality of life is definitely improving, and for example Tower Hamlets now has the shopping centre it formerly lacked at Canary Wharf, where there is a Tesco as well as wide range of smart shops. Owen Whalley, who manages large projects, pointed out that the average income of the 200,000 people working in Canary Wharf is almost four times the income of the average Tower Hamlets household. As a result only the very rich and the very poor can afford to move in to the new homes that are being built. Seema talked about a 'lost generation', but also about the higher aspirations of young people, which is crucial as the supply of unskilled jobs is expected to fall away. So how can the divide be closed, and what can local authorities do to shape places?

Lessons from Abbott's Wharf

Abbott's Wharf is exemplary in a number of ways. It looks good, even though its simple construction made it cost-effective to build. Its appeal comes from the layout of the blocks and the extensive balconies, with views over the canal and Mile End Park. The building is colourful, and as one resident who had moved from Nottingham commented to us *'It is so quiet it is like living in suburbia'*. There is no distinction between the different tenures, and though the density is very high (360 units to the hectare), it does not feel over-whelming, possibly because of the imaginative introduction of a small basin for

canal boats between a couple of the blocks. The Dutch waste storage system not only encourages recycling, but helps remove clutter. The solid walls and high levels of insulation prevent noise disturbance and save on heating bills. The group felt that the public spaces might have been improved by somewhere to sit and meet, and noticed that the commercial units had not yet let, probably because the location is not suitable.

The success of the project is down to the way East Thames Group is run. It acquired the former industrial site without planning permission, and then secured a private partner. Together they ran a limited design competition. As well as now using checklists to assess different aspects, they take advice from a Design Panel. There was no difference in the design of the rented block and the blocks that had been sold or are in shared ownership. Significantly though families had been accommodated on the ground floors, nearly all the 200 units are small, and the scheme would no longer be feasible, given the Mayor's requirement to accommodate 30% families. Comments from a couple of residents suggested that people mix well, though *'We have not joined the Residents Association, we are not moaners!'*

Managing urban change

The group recognised that whole areas in Tower Hamlets had reached a 'tipping point' where something quite different was economically and physically feasible, for example as a result of the improved infrastructure, with both the DLR and the Jubilee Line, and the improved proximity to new sources of employment. However the old approach of responding to developers' proposals was inadequate, and the public sector needed to provide much more of a lead, with masterplans being drawn up for a number of areas. Lack of resources is always a problem, along with Member's concerns for housing local people first. A number of ideas for managing change were generated, inspired in part by lessons from places such as Holland that members of the group had visited:

1. Build an urban design team, as in Milton Keynes, with the capacity to produce masterplans and development briefs
2. Develop visions right at the start for what kind of place should be created to inspire the design briefs and codes (the idea of a charter may help)
3. Enable officers to negotiate within agreed frameworks
4. Adapt and reskill Development Control staff, for example by using checklists, to free up time for more forward thinking
5. Understand environmental sciences and what is feasible
6. Simplify the processes, for example by integrating the Local Development Framework with the Community Strategy, and by setting up multi disciplinary major project teams
7. Adapt the approach to the situation
8. Use a concordat with other agencies to secure commitments to work together, as TfL is doing with a growing number of boroughs
9. *'Calm down and carry on'*

Lessons from Almere

Almere, which was described in the TEN Group report Learning from Dutch Cities, is the largest and fastest growing Dutch new town. As Andrew Armes explained, it is now working closely with Amsterdam on the latest extensions. Leadership is provided through appointed Aldermen, who reflect the prevailing political balance, and are paid to lead in different policy areas, such as social care or growth. The new Alderman on growth, who was formerly a government minister, is committed to the idea that 60% of the new homes will be self-build, through coops or small builders. The Chief Executive and others directors are purely operational, so there is a distinct group simply concerned with how the place should grow. Multi-disciplinary teams are used to deliver major projects, and their roles include finance and community development.

Future meetings

The next meeting will hopefully be held at Design for London and hosted by Peter Bishop. The study tour to Berlin will be held in late September, and suggestions for what we should visit would be welcomed. The group would like to visit Harlow which could take place late October and Sue Foster has kindly offered to host a meeting in Hackney which could be the final meeting of the series.