

# PLANNING *in* LONDON

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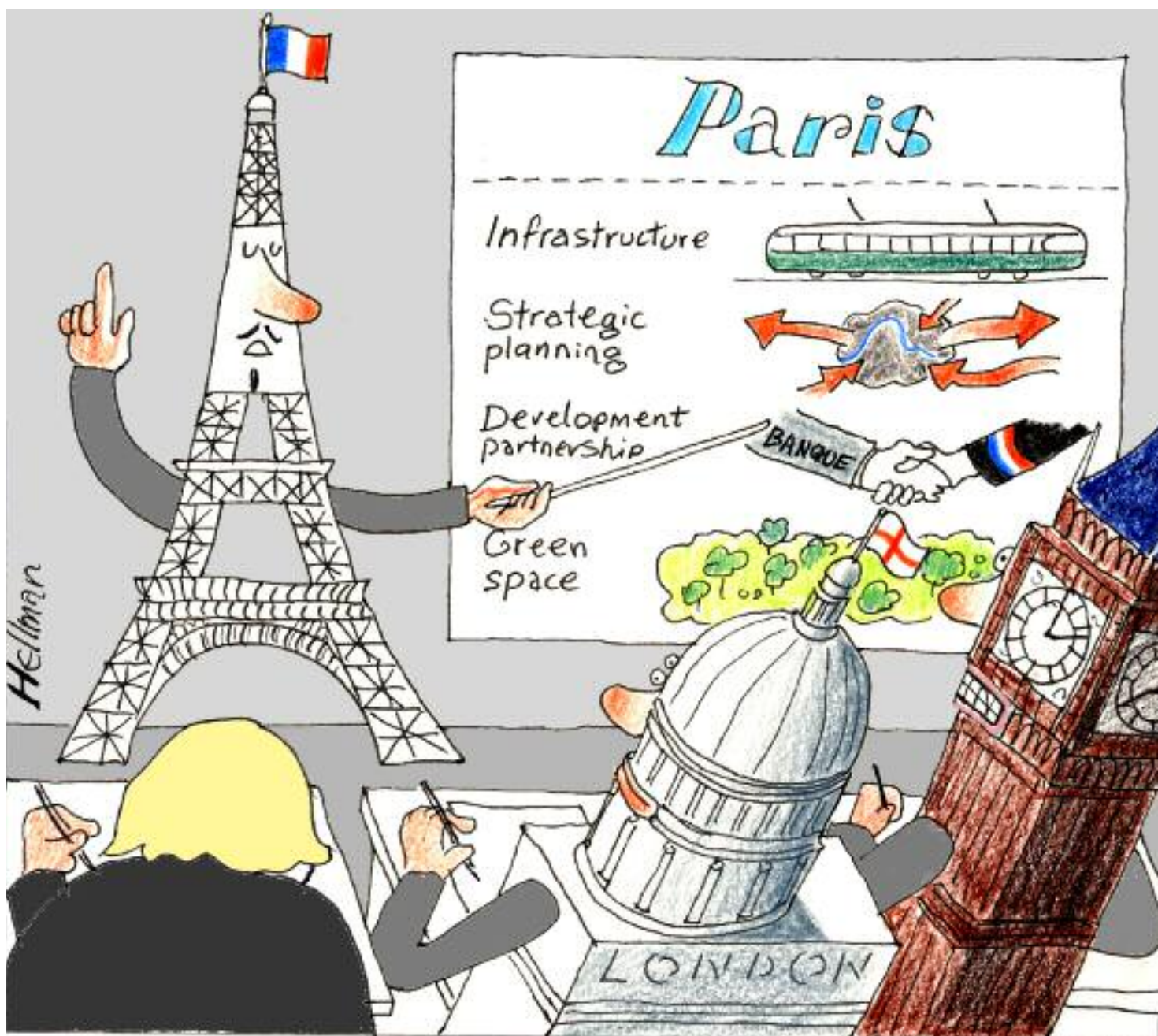
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## LESSONS FROM ABROAD

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# What London could learn about regeneration from Paris

The two capitals share common challenges. There are Continental models from which London could benefit explains Nick Falk

Londoners are so used to thinking about Paris as a unique city – a combination of their fine boulevards and fancy cultural attractions – that we can easily overlook the common challenges our two capitals face. These include not just high levels of immigration and social polarisation that have culminated in riots, but also large areas afflicted by the loss of traditional industry, and the need to attract new roles and investment. In drawing lessons from last year's study tour by the TEN Group – planners and developers who are committed to learning from best practice – we were struck by the similarities of some of the suburban districts along the river and canals with areas such as the Lea Valley in East London that still feel poor relations and suffer from social exclusion (a term coined in France), and the potential lessons for strategic planning and infrastructure funding. I have therefore sought to suggest four issues where further comparisons could pay off.

## Quality infrastructure

While London is at long last getting Crossrail and Thameslink, which should make life better for commuters, Paris has enjoyed its RER or regional transport system for decades. Double deck trains, an upgraded Metro system, and some eight new tramlines around Greater Paris are connecting up the suburbs, and opening up development opportunities in former industrial areas. We saw in Paris Nord-Est, how BNP Paribas (the big bank that is now building offices in Kings Cross) were completing a superb mixed use development at ZAC Claude Bernard. The bank said that the development made sense as they knew the government of Paris was committed to developing the area close by, North of La Villette where old slaughter houses are now a fine park and a new tramway was being tested out.

Paris is also better connected with other French cities through the TGV system which runs on dedicated lines. While railway lines in London are often a barrier to movement, the cutting into Gare de l'Austerlitz has been covered over, to create a massive development site of 130 hectares running all the way from the National Library (a dismal area) to the Périphérique. A new university has reused the old industrial buildings, and the area now promoted as Paris Rive Gauche with its memorable open spaces compares well with any of the high profile developments such as Paddington Basin or Kings Cross.

## Strategic planning

France has managed to build a much better infrastructure not just through investing much more in transport and energy sys-

tems, but also through joining up infrastructure and development. Instead of relying on private developers or landowners taking the lead, local government has led the way. The contrasts clearly emerged in our discussions with the planners responsible for La Plaine St-Denis, an old industrial area in a state of transition. They explained how, by combining seven different municipal planning teams, they had achieved much more influence at a regional level. The process started with the regional planning body, the Institute d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme de l'Ile-de-France, setting priorities in the Schema Directeur. Projects are identified at a local level and bid to become part of the regional masterplan. Once accepted there is chance of being taken up in the next investment plan (Contrat de Développement Territoriale) which releases the funds for engineering and feasibility studies.

There is a priority on integrating development areas with the surrounding areas. Paris Rive Gauche has not only connected the inner city area of Ivry-sur-Seine with the river, but also links it to the Parc de Bercy on the other side with an exciting footbridge.

By defining ZACs (Zone d'Aménagement Concertés) public investment secures a much greater impact than many of our development projects. It may also explain why the pace of development seems so much faster, with little of the opposition that holds back progress in London. The process was easier to understand than the British approach, and seems far more contractual and less adversarial, with lawyers playing a small role, and urbanists a much larger one.

## Development partnerships

For many decades France has been using Societe Mixtes, led by municipalities, to achieve what we have tried to do through Development Corporations and public private partnerships. The main difference is that the French partnerships are established by municipalities, not the central state, and outlive political shifts. We learned how the massive remodelling of Paris Rive Gauche had been achieved through a body that initially brought two adjoining districts together plus SNCF, the French railway company. Many mayors later, the Deputy Chief Architect was still in charge of a team of eleven architects for each sub area, negotiating with private developers to implement the approved masterplan.

Funding is easier because the French are able to tap the Caisse des Depots, a public investment bank which specialises in lending to municipalities. Unlike most British financial institutions they have the in-house expertise to assess complex projects, from energy systems to tourism. Funding for light rail



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projects is also greatly aided by the Versement de Transporte, a charge on employers' payrolls towards improving public transport. 70 per cent of the funds are raised regionally, and with the main utilities under public ownership it is generally easier to secure cooperation, and thus keep costs down. Indeed part of the enthusiasm for tramways has been to use some of the energy generated by atomic power stations.

**Green space**

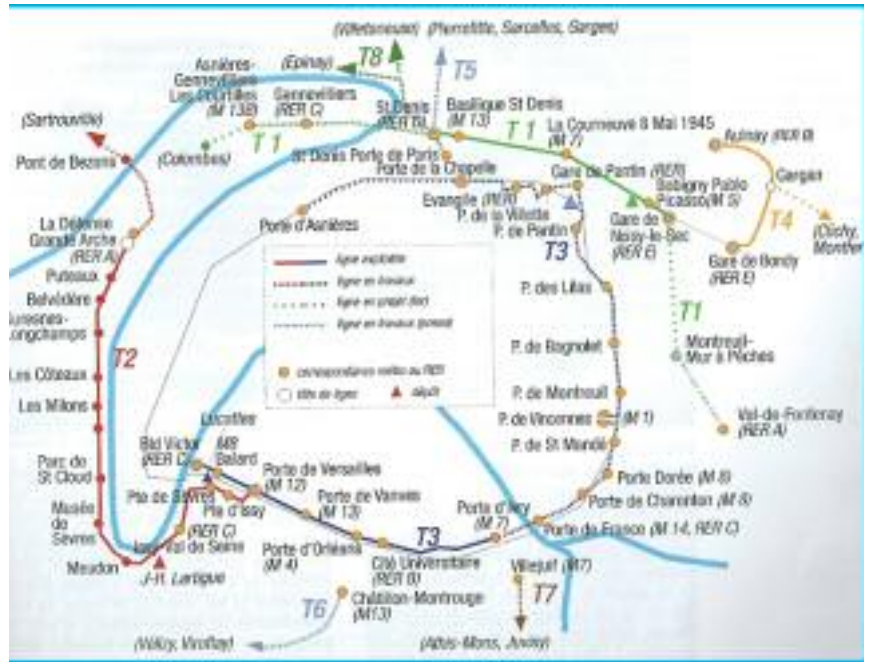
One more lasting impression was the quality being achieved in the public realm, and particularly in new parks and open spaces. By rethinking the relationship between town and country, and going beyond our rigid concept of 'green belts; countryside is percolating through new developments. In Paris Rive Gauche every resident lives within 400 yards of a public garden. The concept of 'open blocks' is a great advance over both isolated tower blocks (which are generally rejected), and perimeter blocks, as it makes walking and cycling so much more pleasant.

Another good example of the new Parisian approach to open space is the linear park along the Viaduc des Artes, which connects up to the Bastille, and the basin where you can get a canal boat up to La Villette. This pioneered the approach that has proved so popular in New York, and again opens up pleasant vistas and recreational opportunities for the residents of the high density apartment blocks that have been developed alongside.

**Conclusions**

Paris is now closer to London than many provincial cities, language is no longer the problem it once was, and a host of exciting development projects are underway or complete. So why is London not paying more attention to one its main competitors? We are deluding ourselves if we think we have all the answers, or that models that work well in Continental Europe cannot be applied here. With regeneration grinding to a halt in many areas, and no practical mechanism for combining transport and other forms of investment except for Section 106, surely it would be worth spending a little more time discussing common problems and comparing alternative ways of managing and financing urban regeneration in our capital cities? ■

*The full report is available on [www.urbed.coop](http://www.urbed.coop). Also look at Nick's blog <http://postcardfromthefuture.wordpress.com/>*



TOP: Plan of tramway network from Connaissance Rail edition Les Tramways Francais in 2012

ABOVE: Space has been gained by bridging the railway lines into Gare du L'Austerlitz

BELOW: In the Massena quarter of Paris Rive Gauche the university has reused old structures and is surrounded by mixed use buildings and parks

