



Transforming Dalston

Lessons from the Public Realm

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Produced by

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TEN Group

TEN is a small group of senior local government officers in London who have met regularly over eight years to share ideas and exchange knowledge on how to achieve urban renaissance. Using the principle of *looking and learning* they visit pioneering projects to draw out lessons that can be applied in their own authorities. In the process the members develop their skills as place-makers, and are able to build up the capacity of their authorities to tackle major projects.

Photographs: unless otherwise stated provided by TEN Group members and URBED.

This report was written by Dr Nicholas Falk who chairs the TEN Group

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Introduction

The TEN Group's fifth meeting of series nine focussed on the value that investment in the public realm can play in regenerating a poor area, and how to link public and private investment. We were fortunate to walk around Dalston with Patrick Hammill, former Director of Urban Renewal at Levitt Bernstein, who have been involved with a number of major projects such as the new housing at Holly Street, and in whose offices we met. We also had discussions with community activists involved in 'meanwhile' uses in the area, and are grateful to contributions from Barry McCulloch, a director of Levitt Bernstein. The issues we explored concern how you assess success, the process of regeneration, the value of different types of public space and art, and the impact that improved connectivity can have on an area, and its integration with the rest of the city. The briefing pack provided some valuable information on the extensive community engagement that has taken place in designing new spaces, and we also drew on a visit to Barratt's marketing suite at Dalston Square.

Regenerating an area in stages

Dalston is a classic inner city area, where once industry and housing were mixed together, and some of the old factories have found new uses as workspace for creative businesses. It is also very mixed demographically, with relatively high valued housing in places like the De Beauvoir Estate next to Council estates with high levels of deprivation. When Broadgate was developed at Liverpool Station, the old Broad Street station was closed in 1986, and the line to Dalston was removed. So although only two miles from the City of London, Dalston felt isolated, and naturally attracted waves of immigrants to replace those who moved out.



Kingsland High Street

The maps that Patrick Hammill provided (below) reveal a series of major projects to transform the area over time. A station on the North London line in 1983 did not overcome the area's image as being unsafe and run-down. The London Borough of Hackney bought the viaduct that runs alongside the Kingsland Road for a Pound in 1986, and removed the safeguarding of the Balls Pond Road and Dalston Lane for a major road scheme. However conventional ideas such as building a new shopping centre in the 1980s were not enough to stop major retailers like Marks and Spencer's pulling out.

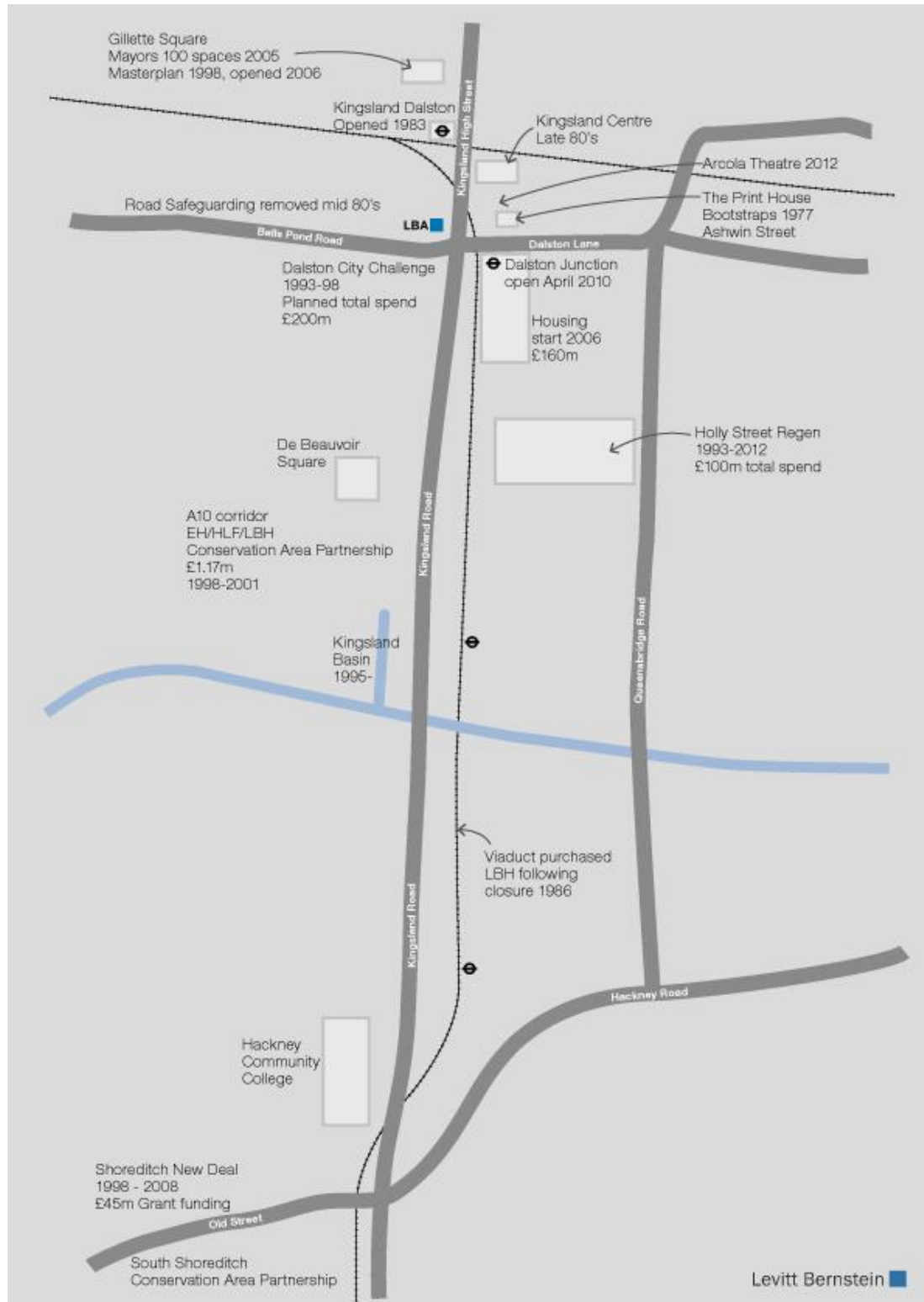
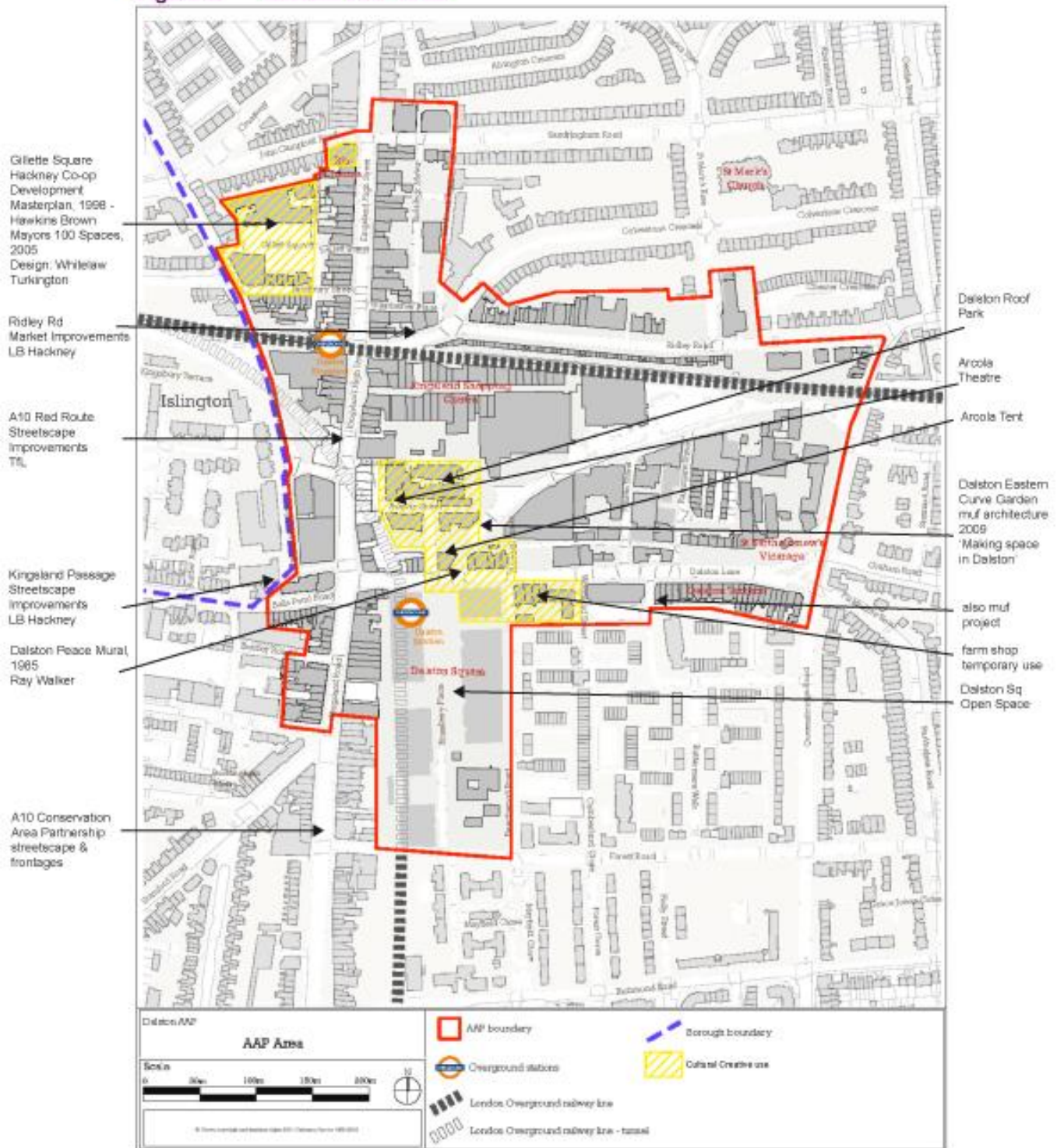


Figure 2: Dalston AAP Area



With the 'Arts' and Streetscape improvements added.

Regeneration in the 1980s included pioneering efforts to create new work by providing workspace and support for new enterprises as a means of tackling the twin problems of unemployment and vacant buildings. Some, such as Bootstrap¹ and Hackney Cooperative Development², are still functioning thirty years on, though their roles, staffing and funding sources have kept changing. Others have disappeared or moved on. Hackney became known as a place where you could buy a house or flat relatively cheaply, with Victorian streets becoming gentrified over time. The Peace Mural, designed by local Ray Walker and painted in 1985 on a prominent wall, symbolises the contribution made by local artists, often attracted by the availability of cheap space and a creative buzz.

Local initiatives were supported through City Challenge, where some £40 million was invested over a five year period from 1993. This brainchild of Michael Heseltine involved major programmes in a number of cities, with locally based teams to coordinate action. The strategy was to link Dalston with the City, and major projects included the new Shoreditch College, aimed at helping local people get the skills needed for better jobs. Feasibility studies were undertaken of the potential of areas like Kingsland Basin. The Holly Street estate, which had been notorious for its dangers, was completely rebuilt in the 1990s through a scheme designed by Levitt Bernstein.

At the same time as some areas were being regenerated, others were falling into disrepair to the point when some had to be cleared of dereliction. Grand projects were being promoted but some felt the answers lay in smaller projects and 'meanwhile uses'. While large scale conservation schemes were undertaken, such as through the A10 partnership, which can be credited with replacing the main pavements with York stone, a study was commissioned by Design for London into the potential for smaller projects. Some 70 landscaping projects were devised, and five or so have been completed. The process has been written up, raising important issues over what approach works best.

¹ <http://www.bootstrapcompany.co.uk/>

² <http://www.hced.co.uk/>



Ashwin Street, home of Bootstrap Company established in 1977



Bootstrap company workspaces are in hot demand



Other Bootstrap initiatives include a roof top allotment garden and a ground floor cafe

Valuing the public realm

The major private development has been over the new station at Dalston Junction. Some 540 apartments have been developed by Barratts in a series of striking blocks in two phases. The scheme is 70% complete, and is fully occupied. Public benefits include a new library and open space. Most of the occupiers are 20-35, and could be described as young professionals, attracted by the convenience of the location. Many of the units were sold to buy to let investors. The development was only made possible through building a platform over the line at a cost over £60 million. The large space through the station was strangely empty, and led on to a bus station used by only one bus. Dalston Square looks empty, perhaps because those who occupy the flats are all out at work in the day, and may not make much use of local shops.

The investment in the Over ground has boosted the area's appeal as a place to live. However Transport for London, or the development process, has not yet succeeded in 'joining up' transport and development to produce a quality outcome.

The next stage in the Dalston Square scheme is building Dalston Point, which is described as 'a residential benchmark.... At the epicentre of creative London.' The lavish brochure talks about 'hassle-free living', with a 24 hour concierge service. The Guardian has described Dalston as 'the coolest place to live in Britain', and the places that can now be visited in less than 15 minutes show the value of investing in the public realm and creativity. But who is to pay for this, and how can the benefits be shared with those who may feel excluded? The attractive brochure does not mention that Gillet Square is where the London riots took off a year ago, or the battle with Turkish business that resulted!

Our visit to the Farm Shop, where fish and vegetables are grown together hydroponically, and to the Eastern Curve Garden revealed the scope for local creativity and community initiatives. An empty



Barratt homes marketing suite



The farm shop offers work spaces & Wifi



The new buildings, up above, look good but Dalston Square at ground level is soul-less and empty.



Some beautiful old buildings, like this one, could do with restoration



Brian Cumming and Marie Murray, managers of the Eastern Curve Garden, kindly explained the history and operation



The Impressive Dalston Peace Mural by Ray Walker and Mick Jones, 1985, guards the entrance to the Eastern Curve Garden



The entrance to the garden is gated and locked afterhours and there is always a staff member present when open



How the Garden got its name

'The report for Design for London on the *Making Space in Dalston* suggests this is what Localism should be about, an emancipatory process in which less money can lead to better solutions'



The facilities include a meeting room can be hired out



The garden provides sheltered areas to relax and watch the children play

shop owned by Hackney was now a hive of activity, with chickens in the back garden (no longer on the roof!). A neglected, derelict site off a busy main road over a closed but safeguarded railway line had been transformed into a place of beauty and a managed refuge for people for groups and individuals. This was prototyped as 'Dalston Mill' to overcome scepticism. Along Ashwin Street, next to where Bootstrap offers managed workspace, the pavement had been beautifully landscaped and the buildings carefully restored. Local businesses are looking after maintenance. The Eastern Curve project cost some £200,000 out of a total budget for small projects of £1 million. A proposed café should help fund future running costs, make use of the gardens produce and attract more people. The report for Design for London on the *Making Space in Dalston* suggests this is what Localism should be about, an emancipatory process in which less money can lead to better solutions.

We walked round Gillet Square, which had won the Academy of Urbanism's Great Place award, and which was initiated by Hackney Cooperative Developments (HCD). This has transformed much of a former car park into a landscaped area, which links through to Kingsland Road. It adjoins a popular jazz club, but otherwise seems cut-off, as there is no active frontage round it. The whole area North of Dalston Kingsland Station now buzzes at night, with innumerable Turkish restaurants. During the day the exotic vegetables sold in the greengrocers and Ridley Road Market provides a reminder of the Caribbean.



The general consensus was that the square was airy and bland and would attract undesirable characters to make it feel unsafe.



One of the five realised 'Making Space Dalston' initiatives was a pack away play ground for the square



Ridley Road Market is buzzing with shoppers

Making the most of connectivity

The phenomenal success of upgrading the old North London line, and rebranding it as the Over ground rather than Silverlink, shows how much can be achieved through investment in infrastructure. Yet despite considerable public investment, private investment is lagging behind. Sites were sitting idle waiting for projects such as hotels and new shops. The main streets were vibrant thanks to the heavy footfall, but through traffic still dominated, while side streets felt empty. The main road was not geared to either cyclists or pedestrians. Expensive paving makes little difference to people walking (though some attractive signing should help people find their way around once they get out of the stations.)

The key to successful regeneration, according to Patrick Hammill, was making places feel 'comfortable.' This is what makes London such a magnet for creative people from all over the world. While success can be measured in factors such as investment or house prices, and in the number of enterprises that start or survive, the most important measures are surely feelings of safety and being welcomed into an area. Certainly developers and investors recognise the importance of activity and attractiveness as places to live before committing themselves. So unless major investments are backed up by measures to make the surrounding streets pleasant to use, they will not pay off in the full sense.

Large developments such as Dalston Square secured their value from the upper floors, so the ground floors could effectively be 'given away', if there were the right uses that reinforced the appeal of the upper floors as places to live or work. But this requires the place to be managed as a whole, and unfortunately it is the funding for activities such as maintenance, town centre management, and economic development that are most vulnerable to the current cuts.

While some areas such as Broadway Market (London Fields) or Stoke Newington might be renewed incrementally through entrepreneurial initiatives, and an organic process, others with less obvious aesthetic appeals needed comprehensive management over several decades. The danger was that visionary plans alone simply boosted speculation, without delivering the real changes needed to transform either people or places. Neither community engagement nor negotiating planning gain was enough on their own.

Conclusions and next event

The discussion at the end of the tour can be summarised by the following points:

- Dalston has been regenerated over a period of over twenty years, in which one project has led to another
- Much of the success must be attributed to individuals who have got hold of cheap space and invested time and money

- The activities have changed the area's image, and helped it find new roles, and these have been assisted by physical signs of change; indeed public art can pay off for developers, as is happening in Ilford
- 'Meanwhile uses' are undoubtedly helping to create places with soul and spirit, while the 'iconic' projects looked a little sad and bleak (a sunnier day might have given a different impression!)
- Some of the public realm projects suffered from being in the wrong place, and from there not yet being enough to create a critical mass Land swapping could have produced better outcomes.

The contrast between the British approach of relying on development control and isolated projects to turn an area around, and the approach we have seen in the visits to European cities suggests the need for a different approach to planning and development. We talked about the potential for a local agency that could easily acquire and manage a number of spaces, and negotiate with private developers and property owners from a position of strength in town centres in transition, such as Dalston. We realised the importance of holding on to the vision, which goes beyond commissioning the occasional study, or even involving acclaimed designers. This should pay off over a period of 20 years, so the problem is funding action over the shorter term in a complex and adversarial political climate.

At the end we considered it would be valuable to have our next and final meeting in a housing estate such as Kidbrooke near Greenwich, where the Berkeley Group is the lead developer with ever more limited public funding many of the problems affecting inner city areas and public housing estates may be being resolved through innovative public private partnerships. It would be useful to get feedback from members on this report, and whether we are addressing issues of widespread importance. There should also be scope for learning from each other about how best to manage development agreements of this kind.