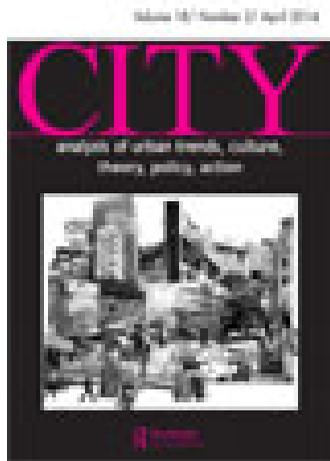


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Forum

Just Space: Building a community-based voice for London planning

An interview by Barbara Lipietz with Richard Lee and Sharon Hayward

Just Space is a London-wide network of voluntary and community groups operating at the regional, borough and neighbourhood levels. It came together in an attempt to influence the strategic (spatial) plan for Greater London—the London Plan—and counter the domination of the planning process by developers and public bodies, the latter often heavily influenced by development interests. What crystallised Just Space participation was the requirement for an Examination in Public of the London Plan, at which Just Space supported the involvement of a wide range of community groups through the sharing of information, research and resources. This interview is an edited version of two conversations with Richard Lee (RL), coordinator of Just Space, and Sharon Hayward (SH), coordinator of London Tenants Federation (a Just Space member organisation). The conversation reflected on some of the challenges linked to bringing community voices to the table on strategic, citywide, planning; the strength in combining academic argument with practical, solid evidence from the grass roots; and the opportunities and challenges of sustaining a horizontal type of organisation across the different scales of the planning system. The conversations took place on 11 March and 30 May 2013 at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL, London.

Key words: Community planning, strategic planning, participatory planning, Neighbourhood Plans, London Plan, community mobilisation

Just Space (JS) is part of the London planning landscape now, providing a much needed community voice at the citywide scale but also, and increasingly, at the neighbourhood level. Can you trace back for us the emergence of Just Space?

RL: Well, JS really emerged in response to the London Plan. The Plan itself is a requirement of the Greater London Authority (GLA) under the GLA Act of 1999 and it has undergone quite a few alterations over time. In

2003, at the first Examination in Public (EiP) of the original London Plan, there was no organised community input. Those involved were progressive individuals or those who were organising London-wide such as the London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies. The missing component was really the grass-roots level. And that's what we sought to change through what became JS, and through the work of London Tenants Federation (LTF). **SH:** LTF wasn't involved in the first EiP. We had focused on the London Housing

Strategy, and it's only gradually that we became aware of the importance, the relevance of the London Plan in terms of housing. I don't think any of the tenants would have been involved in planning issues on a strategic level in their own boroughs at the time. It was only through Richard's encouragement that we got involved in the London Plan. We knew Richard through his involvement with the LTF as a representative of one of the LTF member organisations.

RL: Beyond LTF, another early protagonist in the JS network was the London Civic Forum. They were doing a lot of equality-based work and so, when in 2006 the Mayor issued an Equality and Diversity planning guidance, this really grabbed their attention. The key worker there, Marian Larragy, had seen the LTF and myself at the previous alterations of the London Plan; so she approached me to see if I would be interested in assisting them in taking forward what they had been saying on equality and diversity in planning into the actual London Plan document through the alterations to the London Plan in 2007. I saw this as an opportunity to broaden the community voice at the EiP. If London Civic Forum were willing to put resources into this, which they were, maybe the wider community groups could take advantage of that resource and get themselves better organised, ahead of these alterations. And then other groups joined in. We really wanted to pull together everyone who had made a written comment to the first EiP. And we invited them and that really was the start of some form of alliance developing around the London Plan.

So when did the loose alliance become JS?

RL: Actually, the glue was money from the Mayor's office, granted by Ken Livingstone's team and then running over into the first year of Boris Johnson's term [Boris Johnson was elected Mayor of London in May 2008]. Basically, one of Mayor Livingstone's team had seen the community groups in action at the further alterations EiP (in 2007) and she was very impressed: 'We've not seen anything

like this before, all these community groups taking part and it's very valuable', she said. And she encouraged Marian Larragy to put in a proposal for some funding and we got it. So for that year 2008/09, we got the most money we have ever had up until now in one year, around £30,000 from the Mayor's office!

Resourcing participatory planning ...

RL: Yes, and from the start, when we put together the work programme for that grant, we went across scales. Even though the Mayor's officers were most interested in our assisting them with consultations on London-wide planning documents, we made the case that if we were to bring more people to the table regionally, or citywide if you prefer, then actually we needed to do work at the grass roots and at the borough levels—in order to bring more people in. They accepted our argument and it led to a number of borough-based projects at that time. So for instance in Barnet, we did a series of workshops around their core strategy. And at Dalston, in Hackney, on an Area Action Plan. Both are planning documents at a borough level that go to examination. So we were always, as JS, focused on this issue of public examination, because a number of us felt that this is an interesting part of the planning system where we could actually seek to have some influence.

That's very interesting. Before we explore that point, could you just run us through your work for the 2010 London Plan EiP? That was your most extensive engagement, right?

RL: Yes, the 2010 examination was on Boris Johnson's replacement London Plan; this was a six-month examination on the whole document.¹ We developed a number of activities around that, including an event we did with Friends of the Earth, and a conference called 'London Calling', after the Clash song, which we did with London Voluntary Service Council and Planning Aid for London. And we had other activities with the LTF.

SH: The LTF had its own bit of cash from London councils and we organised two events around the London Plan. We did one in 2009 on *Planning for a Better London*, and one in 2010 just prior to the replacement London Plan EiP. We had various JS members speaking and helping to facilitate workshops at the events including around health and housing, one on the so-called ‘Opportunity Areas’.² In one workshop a tenants’ definition of a Lifetime Neighbourhood was drawn up—specifically aimed at influencing London Plan policy. The definition is important because it uniquely includes a focus on resident empowerment. As a result of LTF’s involvement in the 2010 EiP, a summary of our definition is London Plan policy and it is referred to as a case study in a 2011 government report on Lifetime Neighbourhoods.

RL: Yes, that was a huge and sustained involvement of community groups. JS supported 63 different community groups to take part! Most of these groups had their own seat at the table, but JS secured a ‘hot seat’ for most days of the examination which was shared by 25 community groups who would not otherwise have been able to participate.³

So, the London Plan EIPs (and EiPs of the Plan’s Alterations) have acted as major catalysts for the development of JS. Why has that been the case? What was particular about EiPs that you saw could be an opportunity for community voices?

RL: Well, you can put a lot of time into consultations but then you don’t know what happens, how things are followed through. You’ve got no interface with the organisation that’s doing the consulting. With the London Plan, you can actually go face to face with them and argue and debate.

SH: Yes, and I think if you have no background in planning at all then it takes a bit of time to get your head around the process at first. Government consultations on housing often tend to be a list of questions designed to draw out how what they want

to do can be implemented; and while LTF has frequently engaged in consultations on strategic housing policy, we would never know whether the consultation response had just been binned. Members seldom feel that anyone has taken any notice of their comments. However, as Richard identifies, the process of the EiP acknowledges the comments from grass-roots groups, facilitates engagement and provision of grass-roots evidence. And at times, this results in changes to policy. That’s key, particularly in a context where ordinary working-class community groups don’t win very much. If they actually see they are able to change something, albeit relatively small, it’s something to hold on to! And then maybe work on further. I think it’s an interesting process . . .

RL: And then there is the fact that there is an arbiter; the planning inspector is meant to be independent, you can appeal to him/her. Here you have a framework that, in theory anyway, seeks to ensure some equality between participants. Of course it’s not that straightforward but one can keep on appealing to the justice of the system. I think having this independent element is helpful.

SH: And there are different stages in the process. It’s not just: you put in your written response and that’s it! With the EiP, you put in your first response and then there’s two further opportunities to elaborate: one, in writing and then, if you get invited, at the EiP.

If you’re ‘invited’, does that mean that you are restricted on the area that you can discuss at the EiP?

SH: The invitation comes in relation to the things you said in your written response to the consultation. But once you’re at the EiP you can provide evidence and use it to get to other points if you want. It’s actually quite sophisticated, isn’t it, a process that opens an opportunity to get into a lot more detail, I mean, right down to a level of what was happening on the ground, including around the Olympics and other regeneration areas; people gave their own detailed experience of

what it was like on the ground! That's the very good bit ... but its technicalities can be very hard for community groups to deal with.

What is particularly hard for community groups?

SH: I think the language of a planning document—it's often difficult and technical. And the framing of it ... this is a spatial strategic document with policies that the boroughs will have to engage with (or not). It's a lot harder work to get to grips with, this strategic component—especially for tenant representatives whose focus has increasingly been narrowed to negotiating with landlords on housing management and repair issues. And then the long-term nature of it. The plan looks 15 or more years ahead—it's difficult to get your head around if you are struggling even to address immediate problems on your estate. The long-term vision then feels for many people not very realistic.

So it's engaging on the long term, taking a strategic view, and the trade-offs which you have to think about that are a hurdle?

SH: Yes, we have to work hard to link in that detailed on-the-ground evidence, in order to ... fit together examples, like a jigsaw puzzle, into the London-wide long-term strategic context. I think for the LTF there's a lot more to learn. Some LTF members are obviously very, very interested in it, others less so because they like the familiar tenant movement territory.

Yes, I see ... and so, how would you describe the benefit of bringing community voices to the table for strategic planning? What does it bring to the London Plan?

RL: Well, I think that for most of the people involved in the London Plan EiP back in 2003, it was a debate about policy, it was an intellectual debate. I think that bringing in organisations like LTF adds a focus on practice, what is actually happening on the ground. So, if we take the example of housing, I think some of the issues around the justice of affordable housing or council

housing haven't really changed. But what's changed is the practical stuff, the evidence that is being brought forward. It's a much sharper argument that we're putting forward, because it's based on what's happening across London rather than something that's rather theoretical. To me that's what LTF and its member groups have brought, and other neighbourhood groups that have got involved in the London Plan. They bring that real practical feel to it. And where we manage to get the theoretical, intellectual argument really married up with all that practical, solid evidence at the grass roots ... we are strong, aren't we? We are at our strongest, really.

I must say, sitting in the audience on parts of the EiP, it is impressive: the very detailed inputs into the debates provided by JS members, the ability to link that evidence to wider considerations on the issues being debated. And your use of alternative forms of evidence, showing that grass-roots evidence is as valid, if not more so than that collected by officials for the London Plan—that came across very strongly! Now whether the inspector takes it on board is another story ...

RL: Well, Sharon can give examples where inspectors have congratulated this approach, haven't they? I mean, you were actually asked to lead one of the ...

SH: Yes, on the basis of LTF's response to consultation on the London Plan, it was asked to prepare a detailed briefing note on inner London for the 2010 EiP, and to lead the debate on 'Inner London' by the EiP planning inspector. So we prepared a briefing document on housing schemes in inner London riverside and city side areas that contained no or minimal levels of social housing and which questioned 'mixed tenure' policy. And the inspector apparently visited a number of the examples mentioned by tenants groups living in regeneration areas, particularly those in East London within the Olympic boroughs. The inspector seemed, in almost all debates that LTF

members attended, to be sensitive to tenants' experiences and appeared to want to ensure he had properly understood what they were saying and how that related to the draft strategic policy.

So if I try and sum up, it looks as if, building on your experience in various iterations of the London Plan EiP, creatively tapping into funding sources to galvanise the collection of alternative evidence, you had, by 2010, developed an ability to engage effectively in EiPs. An ability to make the most of an apparently promising institutional format—this relatively open, deliberative process of 'examination in public'—and, in the process, managed to gradually bring in more community voices to the strategic planning debating table. Certainly, there is evidence that GLA officials were a bit taken aback by the sustained presence and pugnacity of community voices at the 2010 EiP. Importantly, this momentum was supported by positive responses by inspectors and some GLA officials. And yet, clearly, there are important limits to the process: the latest EiP [November 2012] was quite a different story ...

SH: Yes, there's a number of points we could raise here to try and explain this apparent setback, including the fact that the 2012 examination over 'minor alterations' was only scheduled for two days and was dealing with housing targets to be written up in the London Plan when housing is such a contentious question in London. The inspector was clearly less sympathetic to community voices.

So, strategically, would it make sense for JS to try and influence not just the content of the London Plan discussion but the process as well? Ensuring that the EiP is properly receptive to a broad range of participatory inputs—and community inputs in particular?

RL: Well we've tried actually. After the 2010 EiP, we met with the Planning Inspectorate

nationally to try and influence this question. We wanted to be recognised by the planning inspectors as a third party, which we're still not really ... we're not recognised as a third party in planning discussions.

With the other two parties being ...

RL: The developers (the private sector) and the public sector. We're about JS, about having a space for the grass roots in this process! We were arguing for targets for the involvement of the community in London planning. But meeting with the Planning Inspectorate didn't go very smoothly. It had been a struggle to get a meeting. We finally got them to meet us but then they hadn't processed the discussion with us very well, so there were some difficulties there.

And then the other tactic there, is that we've always argued that JS should have an input into the research that's undertaken to inform any alterations that are brought forward. We haven't been particularly successful here—although we've had some success, I mean the LTF, you got covered by DCLG's [Department for Communities and Local Government] report on your work on Lifetime Neighbourhoods. But I think we need more of that kind of thing; and when we succeed in shaping evidence, we need to publicise it more. But we can't do it all. I think if we could get several of the London universities to add to pressure on the research side, saying 'we need real collaborative research on London Plan policymaking, we need co-production of knowledge' this would increase our strength! I feel universities and the NGOs [non-governmental organisations] have a responsibility here—when you compare the resources they have with those of say LTF that has only one part-time worker!

Yes, I see what you mean ... and so, how does JS continue its work? There's obviously the ongoing, albeit intermittent work around the London Plan EiPs and, linked to that, the attempt to improve the

process, to make it as equitable as possible, as open to the voices of community as possible. But there are also other ways in which you are working, trying to put pressure on planning generally, not just at the citywide scale, but also at a neighbourhood level; you're doing work on housing, opportunity areas, neighbourhood planning, economic development ... So, how do they feed into one another?

SH: Yes, this is all the new territory ...

RL: Well there's several strands really. I think one that follows from what we've just been discussing is this issue of research and co-production of knowledge. I think the planning authorities see our strength in the demonstration of community needs—we're good at giving that evidence. But the inspectors are mostly looking at other players when it comes to delivery and implementation. So maybe, as we develop, we need to bring in some people who can actually talk the language of delivery and implementation; some people who can say: these are the needs, this is what we see happening on the ground, this is what we want, and here is our expert who can translate that into the delivery and implementation. That would make a stronger case ... But that requires a lot of knitting together, coalition strengthening, and it's what we try to do also—but we don't have the resources ... We try and tap into pots of money when we can find them—that helps. And you've been doing some interesting stuff at the local level.

SH: Yes, I think based on our positive experience of working with other community groups at the regional level and developing more of a strategic outlook, we've just won a small grant from Trust for London to develop three borough-wide and three opportunity area networks of tenants and other community groups around strategic housing and planning issues—in areas where there are large developments planned. This will include work in Newham, Hackney and Greenwich over the next two years.

We're hoping this is going to help strengthen local networks and add an

additional string to the bows of tenants and other groups which we could then link into the regional level—through JS and any later London Plan EiPs. LTF and JS are keen to gather evidence around what's happening in large development areas. LTF and JS and other community groups are also trying to position themselves in terms of the Mayor's new Development Corporation, the LLDC.⁴

So, what would be the role of JS at the neighbourhood level?

SH: We see neighbourhood planning under the Localism Act as potentially an opportunity to promote bottom-up, community participation. For example, with another small pot of money we managed to get hold of, JS and LFT have started working with tenants, residents, businesses and other stakeholders on the Carpenters Estate, adjacent to the Olympic Park to develop a bottom-up community plan with the possibility of this later developing into a Neighbourhood Plan. We've also been trying to encourage them to get involved at the very start of the process of the development of the LLDC's local plan. So basically, at the initial formal presentations by the planning team for the LLDC, JS was the only community group present. So having made a noise in terms of trying to democratise their process, LLDC planning officers are now open to JS facilitating community engagement with the LLDC. We see this as a real opportunity!

RL: And another one is this new Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) which is sort of a new planning gain instrument. We're trying to convince the LLDC that they should be working on the CIL at the same time as their local plan, otherwise, communities will be faced with a *fait accompli*. So we're really trying to push for early engagement of communities into these whole local planning processes to try and shape things from the start. I think what's needed and we're not quite there yet, is to bring in some expertise to the examination table *at a local level*, to really strengthen what we are trying to

achieve generally. I mean, there is more of an opening from the planners to bring the community in *locally*—at least in principle.

But there's another issue there. I always talk about changing the mindset of planning departments. But I think there is also a need to change the mindset of the activists, so that when a senior planning manager (here from LLDC) says to you—we can work with you on producing a place-based strategy, as part of the local plan that we're doing; then for me I don't think you say—'oh they don't mean it, why would we want to work with them anyway'. What's the point of demanding co-production if, when it actually is there in front of you, you don't know how to deal with it?

SH: I guess activists need a real palette of skills—fight when you need to fight and then negotiate when there's an opening being offered to you. We're working with people who haven't had a voice for a long time. On the Carpenters Estate, to an extent, they feel empowered because they've managed to fend off the developers or the planners. But they now need to be able to move from fighting mode to seize opportunities offered to engage in setting the agenda, planning-wise. If they don't do this they are left waiting for the next plan to come along and somebody else to design it. If they then don't like it, they'll have to go back to resisting and it will all start all over again—which is ineffective fighting!

RL: Getting people to go beyond the critique and beyond the proposing of 'an alternative' and actually making it happen—that's the difficulty, that's really difficult! And this is a problem with neighbourhood planning... Saying that, I don't think it's entirely realistic to expect the community groups to be skilling themselves suddenly to be able to engage with these new planning openings at the local level. So yes, they need to develop the strategies to identify openings. But why can't the local community groups have access to expertise on their terms to help them move forward, you know? To ensure that you are able to negotiate effectively.

It's got to be on their terms, it's got to be community led, that's the issue for us. So I think we also need to push in that direction. That's also got to be one of our areas of focus within JS.

Moving beyond the oppositional and into the propositional—more than that, into the production of the alternative(s)—everywhere, that's the hardest, isn't it! And so, how do you choose your new 'battle horses' within JS? How do you agree on the priorities within JS?

SH: Well, I would say because JS is a grouping of different members, to an extent it's led by the priorities of individual groups—but with some notion of where this fits collectively. LTF's interest in opportunity areas comes from very locally based concerns—people are concerned about big developments going on in their areas and wanting to have an input into this. But from the JS bigger picture, the Opportunity Areas are also a key area to watch. This is where most homes and jobs will be developed. So what kind of homes, what kind of jobs, what's going on there? We need to be able to monitor and influence this and it will provide more evidence come the next examination of the London Plan. And of course, this was also an issue that a group like Trust for London might fund. So yes, one has to argue that priorities are also about taking opportunities as best we can.

RL: I think we've made strategic decisions as JS on what our priorities are and what actions we want to take and that usually comes out of the London Plan... until now, it's really come out of the London Plan examination process hasn't it? Because that's a very intense process and it kind of puts us in the position where we have to apply our minds to what changes we want and how we can go about arguing for this. So when we had conferences and workshops within JS, Opportunity Areas came up as a key area that was important for JS and its members—and we agreed we needed to research these processes at the local level. And so then we look for funding opportunities to carry out this

research—but it's not opportunistic, it's quite strategic; it's targeted action research.

Yes, that's the definition of strategic action planning really, making strategic choices, seeking cumulative effects, attempting to increase the room for manoeuvre of community groups... And so it's a strategic decision for you to work across scales—at the neighbourhood level as well as the city-wide scale?

SH: Well yes, without the local bits, we don't have the regional picture do we? But I think community groups also often struggle to see the link between the local and the regional. Especially when people are in crisis mode, involved in their own local fights, and community groups are quite depleted in many areas and in many ways.

RL: Yes, and I think from the other side, the value of continually generating local input to feed into the regional or citywide scale is not understood by the regional players either. Even people who are very experienced are content for one tenant's voice to come to the debating table, and for it to be the same voice again and again. There's no understanding that actually it's important to keep on bringing new voices forward. They're the lifeblood of JS—I mean it's great that we have those who can analyse a document and summarise it and who have developed a professional expertise. But the lifeblood is the activists at the grass roots. I mean, if you have always the same representative voices from the community the danger is obviously to get co-opted. So if we want real community engagement citywide, then there's got to be an interplay between the city authority engaging with us as a stakeholder group that has a diversity of community representation, and that stakeholder group having the commitment and the processes in place to ensure they are constantly replenishing themselves and constantly bringing up from the roots. I guess you could argue that the existence of JS is critical to overcome the pressures on local groups to stay local, and on regional actors to stay

regional. In a way JS is forcing those two levels to interact and to think about how they can gain a benefit.

Yes so this work across scale is really key for the two sides. And yet it is difficult to do ...

SH: Yes, and the tension is not easy to navigate for community groups. In terms of community mobilisation it is very important to focus locally. You have to work hard on the ground so people really understand who they are fighting against, but also who they are, who their community is. So for instance, although the Carpenters campaigners are struggling to link their fight with London-wide process, they are also consistently reaching out to others further up the hierarchy—to help solve their problems. And in that instance, to be effective (long term) they must first focus locally, build the strength within their own community, get involved in face-to-face engagement in their estate, document their own local evidence, make it public and articulate it at the grass-roots level.

That's interesting because this focus on local production of local knowledge, on your own terms, through enumeration, mapping, etc. is a tool that's being used internationally by many community groups, as a means to shift power relations in their engagement with local authorities or the private sector ...

SH: Well, it's something we don't do enough of here.

RL: And I think it's something the universities don't fully grasp—the dynamics of community mobilisation and organisation I mean. We hear so often negatives about community organisation: are they representative? Is the community group representative? Is it made up of the usual suspects? Are they NIMBYs? These are the usual questions and these are lazy questions and yet academics focus on these as the key issues. Well, in my experience these issues are a barrier, for sure, but it's a very partial way of looking at the question of community mobilisation.

If they really want to assist participation, universities have got to understand how it all works and they don't at the moment because they hardly do any teaching on it for a start. And on the statutory front, the focus is usually on representativeness: you have to get yourself constituted and spend all your energy having an organisational form that mirrors the organisational form of the political party or the local authority, in order to gain any influence at all. But then you lose the influence because you've just mirrored their organisational form—but that's not where the focus should be, is it? I mean the real issue is the human impact of these developments on people, on communities living there and trading there. So why isn't there a social impact assessment carried out? Why isn't there real independent evaluation of what it means on the human beings who are active in this community now?

So that's where lies the centrality of very localised community mobilisation, if I get you correctly. In order to develop people-centred, non-developer-driven practices of citywide planning, you need to really be able to understand and nurture very localised concerns, very localised mobilisations, right? But you raise an additional issue when talking about community mobilisation, Richard. And that's how you create a 'community' voice with/through diversity. One interesting issue within JS is this co-presence of highly diverse organisations—not just organisations operating at different scales, but organisations with very different sectoral interests. How does that work in practice?

RL: Well within JS we have an alliance of environmental groups, tenants groups, communities of interest, by which I'd include various equality-based groups, neighbourhood groups other than tenants groups, and NGOs (the larger voluntary sector players). I think some argue that the greatest tension is between the housing groups and the environmental groups, but I don't see it that way. For me, the question is more how

does one keep on board both the voluntary sector, with their particular way of working and needs, and the grass-roots groups with their way of working and needs, I find that's a struggle sometimes. The voluntary sector has a hierarchal mode of organising. They have paid staff and our engagement with them is with their paid staff. Whereas with the neighbourhood-based groups, the engagement is with activists.

And then I think the other challenge is around the 'minority interests'. People find it hard to see why we should have such a focus. But we've had great experiences with for example gypsies and travellers, one of the most marginalised groups. We facilitated a really productive workshop between the LTF and the London Gypsy and Traveller Unit when there was quite a bit of anxiety on both sides. But once people started talking around the table it very quickly became absolutely fine: all agreed that Gypsies and Travellers do need homes—it's a housing issue—but that there needs to be a much better process for making decisions about Gypsy and Traveller sites. Because we addressed this question in a horizontal way, actually we quickly got to points of agreement, rather than concentrating on disagreement, because everyone was equal around the table. So to me, that's a positive for our way of working.

SH: However, if you are dealing with an issue such as health inequalities and what the London Plan says about this, is it helpful, in terms of providing a stronger collective voice, to argue that this is a race or a class issue? Some of us within JS have very different views on this. But generally, within JS, we are able to work through potential tensions because we work through consensus where it's required. Or where we don't reach consensus, we can have a range of different views expressed by individual members to reflect the diversity within JS.

Can you tell us a bit more about this mode of working with JS, this focus on consensus and horizontality?

RL: It's key to the way we operate and, going back to the point I was making earlier, it's really something that many academics don't get, I don't think. I was at an academic conference on the Localism Act and there was a discussion about power. The main view was that consensus was very unhealthy, that it leads to the lowest denominator. So I made a point about how I'm part of a number of community groups who seek a consensual way of working as very empowering and essential and I am really surprised that you haven't researched this. And they were not happy about my input. And yet this was a progressive academic audience—but what I was saying was outside their way of thinking, completely!

I've often seen this at the EiP: people hold on strongly to their intellectual arguments but when the Mayor of London's officers turn around with their intellectual arguments in return, or even go to another level and use threats—which happens—and try and foreclose the intellectual discussion, in my experience the intellectuals don't know what to do next. And I see that it's the community groups, the activists, with their passion and who are living in the affected areas who are more practically minded and find a way forward. They have a much wider range of tools, a wider range of ways of operating. They are the ones who are then able to carry on the fight. That's what I see with the London EiP: when it comes to the crux, it's actually the people who are the activists who are really the ones who keep things moving, who keep the lifeblood there.

SH: I mean, if you are at the bottom of the pile the only way you gain anything is by articulating a stronger collective voice. The middle classes, the elite don't need this—competition and the cult of the individual, winning the debate provides the status and money required to achieve what they want. But at the grass roots, I think we see the value of working with consensus. LTF also operates in a horizontal (consensus) fashion, even though its members are from organisations that do have more formal

structures. At the London-wide scale there is an attempt to provide the strongest possible collective voice and to avoid damaging splits and divisions. This does not mean that the debates are not had on issues where there are differences but simply that there is no necessity for LTF members collectively to agonise over this, once it's established that there are differences. Having a strong collective voice—in a context where our voice tends not to be heard—that's what's important!

RL: I think that if you set up an organisation where you elect a chair, that person's going to feel that they've got power; and if you have an elected committee then there's a competition to be on the committee, there's a status issue. But the question is what happens to those that don't get elected. They're either going to leave or they're going to organise and form a faction against those who did get elected and so you create that kind of problem within your group. We just see this happening all the time. So I think what facilitates a consensual approach is working more horizontally. It perhaps doesn't attract some of the NGOs into JS, who'd like to be invited to board meetings say, but it's important to keep as broad a group of community groups involved.

And what would you say is—or is there?—a common ideology binding those various interests within JS?

RL: I wouldn't say there is a common ideology, but shared values, yes.

SH: Yes, because we don't agree on all issues within JS! And we don't all write the evidence for the EiPs together for instance. Some will take the lead on some sections, because they have particular interest or information on that issue and generally people would say, we can more or less agree with that; we wouldn't express the same stuff within our own responses, but we're not offended by the statement. Some JS members will also put evidence forward for the EiP under their own organisational name. And there's a degree of empathy

towards others' causes—so while LTF wouldn't consider gypsies and travellers' issues to be within our remit, we will still put in a short statement sufficient to say that we are supporting what another JS organisation is saying.

RL: And we all have our areas of expertise.

SH: Yes. An organisation like LTF is focused mostly on, and has agreed policy positions on, housing issues. It will have had less debate and less formal agreement for example on issues such as environment or employment issues.

RL: But you've moved on this, under the banner of Lifetime Neighbourhoods... To be honest I don't think there's political agreement around the JS table either! But I think the very strong glue between members of JS is the need to resist top-down development in its very many manifestations, and a concern about the actual impact on ordinary people. We would all say across JS: yes this issue is important because it's about people. I think everyone who comes has the motivation to counter the domination by developers and by public authorities of planning decisions. I don't know whether you call it an ideology but it's an idea about bottom-up, that people really matter, and we don't like the way London is being developed.

SH: Ideologically I wouldn't agree with a lot of the people around the JS table, but as Richard has rightly described, what brings us together is the provision of a stronger community-based voice. I think people have come to JS meetings because they see the purpose of community-based discussion and involvement (even if we don't all agree on all issues). I also think the EiPs of the London Plan are when people feel most the need to come together. Between the EiPs, well, various groups have their own workloads and people may not engage so actively in JS activities.

RL: You're right about the Examination that's really when you see the greatest unity within JS and JS has become identified with the hot seat at the EiP (even though I know

LTF did this first)—and I think people find that very attractive.

And finally, what do you feel are the generative aspects of having such a diverse group of interests under the banner of JS? I heard Sharon talk about the conferences LTF has organised on health and housing, lifetime neighbourhood—clearly moving beyond immediate tenants' concerns... it feels like there is a very productive outcome of this coming together of diverse organisations under JS, with diverse sectoral interests, that gets translated into other scales, other planning moments...

SH: Yes, what's happening within the network is that different groups, with particular interests, have made links with other people or have influenced others. So in terms of the LTF, our experience within JS has certainly widened our areas of interest. Perhaps it's got to do with the way in which those diverse interests were brought together; so in JS, working on the London Plan, everybody brings in their issue through the lens of planning and how it's been expressed in the London Plan. And perhaps that's what has made the various sectoral interests more easily relatable? Maybe it made it easier to make those links across groups? It's certainly been very healthy for LTF... and I guess we've passed the housing experience onto other groups.

There's something else that's been important for LTF in the whole JS experience. LTF is a London-wide organisation whose individual member parts (mostly borough-wide social tenants groups) are getting weaker every year—because funding for independent organisations has reduced, and because working-class communities have been increasingly destabilised and ground down. And so having those stronger links with other organisations, being able to share and exchange with and learn new skills from others has been really beneficial. It's also facilitated LTF achieving some successes in influencing regional policy. And that's why

JS and participating in the London Plan EiPs is so important for organisations like LTF.

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Notes

- 1 <http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/planning/publications/the-london-plan>
- 2 Opportunity Areas are areas for large-scale development, each with more than 5000 new jobs and/or 2500 new homes.
- 3 Work produced by JS around the 2010 EiP can be found at: <http://justspace2010.wordpress.com/>
- 4 The LLDC stands for the London Legacy Development Corporation, the organisation set up to plan, develop, manage and maintain the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park and its facilities after the London 2012 Games (see <http://www.londonlegacy.co.uk>).

Richard Lee is coordinator of Just Space. Email: richardlee50@gmail.com

Sharon Hayward is coordinator of London Tenants Federation. Email: info@londontenants.org. This interview forms part of a broader research on community participation in city-wide planning, enabled by a small grant from UCL's Grand Challenge on Sustainable Cities.