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Book title has changed since this chapter was written: ~~London after Labour~~ then ~~London under austerity~~ finally

***London: Coping with Austerity***

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**Do Londoners make their own plans?**

**Michael Edwards**

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This chapter concentrates on the attempts of various organisations of civil society to challenge London plans since 2000 and to widen the debate on crucial planning issues. It is largely the product of participant observation, the author having taken part, and been partisan, in the events reported here.

London has a long history of citizens and local campaigns playing an active role in urban political life and sometimes influencing the development of the city in decisive ways. The St Pancras Rent Strike of 1960 (Burn 1972) had been a major uprising against rent increases and means testing in council housing. The Save Covent Garden Campaign of the 1970s (Franks 1996) and Tolmers Square (Wates 1976) are among the best known of local planning struggles, both securing major defeats of developer-driven restructuring of run-down areas and leading to high-quality outcomes balancing diverse social

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needs with commercial pressures. Campaigns tended to be localised, however, except for the Homes Before Roads movement against the Draft Greater London Development Plan (Headicar 2009) and the protracted resistance against the London Docklands Development Corporation in the Thatcher period (Colenutt 1988).

These controversies, local and occasionally metropolitan, now play themselves out in a form of society which has sometimes been described as 'post-political' (Swyngedouw and Cook 2009) in that the neo-liberal discourse becomes so dominant that there is space in public life only for a consensus view of the world and of the city. Although inequalities and exploitation worsen, formal politics is almost entirely denuded of serious conflict and political party policies differ in relatively trivial ways. In such a context, there is little space for the expression of serious dissent and those counter-views which are expressed have little detectable impact on events. Even the near-collapse of the international financial system and the mounting evidence of environmental breakdown and peak oil (Atkinson 2010) scarcely yet disturb the prevailing orthodoxy.

London's last metropolitan administration, the Greater London Council, was abolished in 1986, early in the neo-liberal period, because it had become a focus for substantial challenges to the (then-new) orthodoxy. When a revived London Government was promised by New Labour, and then created, many were optimistic about the new urban politics which might emerge. In 1999 I wrote

But we now have a new prospect: from May 2000 London will have a directly-elected Mayor and (for the first time since 1986) an elected Assembly. The mayor will have the duty to prepare strategies for the economy, for the environment and for 'spatial

development'. All this offers an opportunity for a remarkable new opening in democratic communication about London and its problems. In the run-up to this new system, however, the signs are that politicians and interest groups are busy forming essentially-private agendas to put before the Mayor and that the offices of the new organisations will be staffed by the same people who did the work before. Ensuring that this new regime becomes really a democratic one, and that communication opens up, is a great challenge. The danger is that communication could be even more centrally managed. (Edwards 2000)

In the event, although the first mayoralty was captured in May 2000 by a radical, Ken Livingstone, he was in turn captured—at least on many core issues—by the real estate and financial interests which had been running London policy for years and his approach to planning was, from the first, very much business as usual except in his approach to housing and transport. On housing—the most obviously divisive issue in London Planning throughout the last century, but one on which his powers were limited—he sought to impose output and 'affordability' targets on reluctant outer boroughs and he tried to secure substantial 'affordable' housing contributions from developers through tough negotiation of s106 agreements. On transport he was bold and brave, pushing through the central London Congestion Charge and fighting tooth and nail against the national government's determination to privatise the infrastructure of the Underground. In the latter he was defeated but, all the same, he presided over a true renaissance in public transport for Londoners and eventually secured control over much of the surface rail network.

The emphasis in the London Government Act (1999) on 'strategies' as the principal outputs of the Mayor's office might have been expected to

open up fertile debates on major choices facing London. The most important of was the 'Spatial Development Strategy'. The term embodied in the law came straight from the (then) influential European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP 1999) and Healey (2010) quotes the leading Flemish planner Louis Albrechts in support of this ambitious approach to 'strategy':

Strategic planning is selective and oriented to issues that really matter. As it is impossible to do everything that needs to be done, "strategic" implies that some decisions and actions are considered more important than others and that much of the process lies in making the tough decisions about what is most important for the purpose of producing fair, structural responses to problems, challenges, aspirations, and diversity." (Albrechts, 2004, pp. 751–752 quoted by Healey 2010)

In her survey of recent 'strategic' plans in Europe, Healey finds herself profoundly disappointed, however:

...a lot of "strategies" have been produced by agencies involved in urban governance and urban development. However, only some of these actually produce significant effects other than ensuring formal compliance in order to attract funds or meet regulatory requirements. Some strategy statements may serve political purposes through a rhetorical flourish which displays the promises of a mayor or local regime. Other so-called strategies may merely record already well-established directions. (Healey 2010)

The many 'strategies' which the Mayor of London is required or has chosen to prepare do deal with important topics (see box 1) but they have not, in general, posed key choices or been effective in generating

public debate about alternative paths for London's development. While all of them have been produced first in draft form and then finalised after consultation, they remain statements of the promises or aspirations of the Mayor, rather than the outcome of serious public deliberation.

<b>Box 1: London Mayoral Strategies</b>	
<b>From 2000</b>	<b>Added from 2008</b>
Spatial Development Strategy SDS (=“London Plan”)	
Economy	Health Inequalities
Waste	Housing
Transport	Skills
Climate Change and Energy Strategy and Climate Change Adaptation Strategy	
Bio-diversity	
Air Quality	
Noise	
Culture	

The Spatial Development Strategy, now formally known as *The London Plan* is, however, slightly exceptional in this respect. It forms part of the Development Plan under the terms of the Town and Country Planning Acts and thus benefits from the long British tradition that development plans can only come into effect after a formalised consultation process which includes statutory public hearings, the 'Examination in Public' (EiP). In this one (and only one) sphere of public life—Town Planning—some distinct citizen rights to participate have been embedded in the law since 1968.

The production of The London Plans to date (Box 2) has been a massive achievement by a small professional team in City Hall,

working at speed and starting on the next round of revisions as each version is finalised. The third adopted version of the Livingstone plan, consolidated with alterations, appeared in 2008 and ran to 508 pages (Mayor 2008).

**Box 2: London Plan Progress**

May 2000 – Mayor/ GLA starts work

May 2001 – *Towards a London Plan* published, a prospectus

July 2002 - *Draft London Plan* published, then 3 months consultation  
12,000 representations from 650 respondents

March/April 2003 – examination in public EiP

February 2004 – final plan published

Cycles of revision in 2005 and 2007 with consolidated version published 2008.

Mayor Livingstone then followed by Mayor Johnson.

Further small revision 2009 about funding Crossrail

September 2009 *Draft Replacement London Plan* published for consultation

7151 representations from 929 respondents

EiP June-October 2010

**Box 3: Key formal planning powers of the Mayor**

- 33 borough plans must generally conform to the London Plan.
  - “Strategic” (=big, or riverside etc...) projects are referred to Mayor for consideration and perhaps decision. He has power to impose a refusal on a Borough minded to approve, and (from 2008) also the power to impose a permission where a Borough wants to refuse.
  - Budget powers of the Mayor are very limited except
    - Some economic development budget
    - Transport for London (including congestion charge)
    - Government (HCA) housing funds (from 2008)
- All constrained slightly by the Assembly, and with his budget requiring the Assembly's agreement and thus giving it some leverage.

Key features of the Livingstone plans can be summarised as follows. The plans welcomed the economic and population growth of the city, supported the growing 'global city' role of London and undertook to contain this growth within the urban envelope, that is without

infringing on the Green Belt around London. To do this, it espoused higher densities of housing development, managed through a formula linked to public transport accessibility. A very strong feature of the plans was the improvement of public transport, notably the bus services, where there were to be mutually-reinforcing gains with congestion charging in the centre.

The plans aimed to secure housing to meet social need through imposing obligations on private developers, to supplement public money, and imposing "affordable housing" targets on the 33 boroughs.

In most other respects, however, the plans were oriented to, or severely constrained by, the needs and demands of property and corporate interests, supporting the growth of the central office district and the market determination of the 'viability' of development projects. Although the plans spoke of 'polycentric' ambitions for London they deferred to the 'evidence' that market forces were generally ill-disposed towards suburban office development and thus very little, if any, shift of employment to points nearer homes was going to be feasible.

This feature of the plans is a good example of the fetishisation of the market within orthodox urban economics. The long boom in London house prices since the mid 90s boosted the value of land on which housing could be built to levels higher than could be achieved in any other use, outside a few central spots. Very few suburban office development schemes could compete with housing schemes as a result, especially after the 2004 London Plan formalised the rush to higher housing densities. Suburban jobs were thus being squeezed out by an inflated housing market and weak planning. This interpretation,

challenges the sanctity of market 'evidence', however, and has never been accepted.

The London Plan's approach to urban 'regeneration' was also strongly market-oriented, relying on private investment to partner with public bodies in re-using already-developed land. All of this was in a context where, until 2007, international and national economic forces were channelling money capital into rent-seeking in the built environment and thus to a continuing surge in housing prices and rents. The Mayor had little direct influence on these forces, or on the continuing shrinkage of the council housing stock, driven by national government policy. Indeed his espousal of densification as his key strategy led to sacrifices in housing floor space and open space standards and to heightened expectations in the land market which exacerbated the price spiral.

The tensions facing Livingstone in his dealings with financial and property interests are the subject of sympathetic critical analysis by Doreen Massey (2006, 2007a and especially 2007b).

In the first years of the century some of the green movements and scattered left groups began to press for changes in policy and at the Examination in Public of the first London Plan in 2003 various groups and individuals, including myself, found ourselves round the table of the hearings pressing our overlapping but un-coordinated critiques. Some of those groups and individuals, including the present author, formed a London Social Forum which ran for some years, linking tenants' groups, some local campaigns, rights organisations, environmentalists and so on, connecting in turn with the European and World Social Forums. Its main effect was to widen the contact networks across the city region and to mount a public conference on

Alternative Futures for London in the City Hall in October 2005. This brought together over 100 individuals representing many groups and campaigns and strengthened links and debating capacity in a useful way. It led up to a relatively coordinated presentation of challenges on housing issues to the second London Plan EiP in 2006: demands for more social rented housing, better size mix in developments and better social infrastructure. (EiP Panel 2006)

It was notable, however, that these initiatives all had to be resourced entirely by voluntary labour and had no access to any public support in cash or in kind. It was salutary to discover that a group of citizens seeking to hold a meeting on city policy at City Hall were treated as though they were a corporate function. The good offices of Green members of the Assembly reduced the rent to £1 but the Social Forum had to take out public liability insurance of £5m and pay the costs of security staff just to meet in 'our' city hall. These contradictions are the subject of current research by Teresa Hoskyns (in preparation ).

Shortly after that event the London Social Forum split when many of us detached ourselves from it in response to some difficult group dynamics and the lack of agreed means to deal with conflict. Out of this came the formation of the Just Space Network of groups seeking to support each other in developing challenges to London planning policies. The network challenged the processes of the plan: the failure genuinely to support the engagement of working class and ethnic minority groups or to foster fundamental public debate about London's trajectory. It stressed the enormous gap between housing need and what was being provided, the environmental and social arguments for more jobs to be closer to homes, the dangers of the commodification of public services and the inadequate attention to environmental sustainability.

This Network had strong support in its infancy from Marian Larragy and Richard Lee at the London Civic Forum where the new organisation was based and it was able to secure small amounts of funding from charitable trusts, London Councils and from the planning section of the Mayor's office to do work in 'capacity building' on planning issues at London and borough levels. This all led up to some effective and well-prepared interventions at the 2007 EiP, notably the co-ordinated involvement of the London Tenants Federation and of many other groups orchestrated by Just Space and the London Civic Forum. The EiP panel was asked, and agreed, to a 'hot seat' at the hearings for Just Space member organisations, a large number of which were thus enabled to participate on the specific topics where their experience would count. The subject matter of the Just Space submissions was constrained by the fact that only a specific set of 'alterations' were open to debate, but these constraints did not prevent some robust challenges on the still-inadequate output of social rented housing, displacement and gentrification in 'regeneration' and need to strengthen the new draft policies on climate change. (EiP Panel 2007)

In 2008 Ken Livingstone failed to win a third term as Mayor, losing to the Conservative, Boris Johnston. Since the extant Plan was very much seen as 'Ken's Plan' everyone expected that there would now have to be a new one—Boris's Plan—and that this one would embody—as it did—some radical changes in line with the new Mayor's position: notably a ~~removal~~ weakening of the pressure on outer suburban Boroughs to meet housing targets and a reduction of the target levels of provision for 'affordable', and especially of social rented, housing to be imposed on developers under s106. The new mayor's commitment to greater autonomy for Boroughs was strong, and also led to some relaxation in the previously very restrictive approach to car parking

space. The priority to be attached to global warming and related environmental issues was also weakened, except for a strong emphasis on cycling. One positive new element in the Draft Plan was the policy of developing 'lifetime neighbourhoods': an approach to public space and service provision which seeks to enable people of all age groups and degrees of mobility better to meet their needs locally.

Accordingly, Just Space Network groups began to gear up to respond to and challenge this new Plan, which was published for consultation in the Autumn of 2009. This time there was no money available from City Hall to support the work and relations were sometime a bit strained. We were invited to put to the Mayor's planning team early proposals for research which we considered should be done, and did so in July 2009, though to no visible effect beyond triggering a defensive rebuttal of our suggestions. The London Civic Forum was able to support some of the Just Space events and we were fortunate to secure two small grants from UCL's Public Engagement fund<sup>i</sup> which was a grant from the Higher Education Funding Council for England designed to re-orient university activity to serve community groups and weaker sections of the society. The grants were used to facilitate the participation of some university staff and students in the technical support of citizen groups in Just Space. A number of graduate students made outstanding contributions in this way and several very effective network meetings were held to prepare analyses of the Draft Plan's proposals.

**Box 4: Just Space Network members include...**

***London-wide federations of local groups***

London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies  
London Tenants Federation  
London Voluntary Service Council (LVSC)

***Local groups, campaigns***

Hayes and Harlington Community Forum  
King's Cross Railway Lands Group (KXRLG)  
Camden Tenants Federation  
North Finchley Agenda 21 Environment Forum  
Spitalfields Community Association  
Friends of Queen's Market (Upton Park, Newham)

***London-wide, or national, campaigns***

London Gypsy and Traveller Unit  
Race on the Agenda (ROTA)  
London Civic Forum  
Friends of the Earth London  
Women's Design Service  
Black Neighbourhood Renewal and Regeneration Network  
Age Concern London  
Third Sector Alliance (3SA)  
together with technical support organisations:  
    UCL Bartlett School of Planning  
    Planning Aid for London

At the time of writing (July 2010) the Examination in Public of the Draft Replacement London Plan has opened with three weeks of hearings, to be followed by a further five beginning in September. Nothing can thus be said about any impact which the Just Space groups may have on the substance of the eventual Plan.

The critique being mounted, however, is summarised in a press release:

The Just Space Network is concerned that the Plan, which sets out the Mayor's planning strategy for the capital, will not tackle long-standing issues facing London such as inequality, pressure on the environment and the need to foster sustainable communities.

Representing thousands of Londoners, the Just Space Network is an alliance of local community groups and London-wide pressure groups and will participate at the Examination in Public (EiP) of the London Plan. The groups will promote a positive set of improvements to policy and a more radical long-term vision during this key scrutiny of the capital's 25-year strategy, which influences and directs all local borough plans.

The JS groups will debate alongside the many property developers and business sector lobbies also appearing at the hearings and expect to clash with these on many issues throughout the 36-day process. Dave Morris of Haringey Federation of Residents Associations, on behalf of the Just Space network, said: "We aim to put forward changes to policy that would make planning decisions fairer as well as environmentally responsible for the future. All communities should have the greatest possible influence over the policies, resources and decision-making which affect their neighbourhoods."

In its opening spoken and written statement Just Space said:

What Just Space groups have in common is a central concern with environmental and social sustainability - and our focus in social terms is on those who are poor, exploited or in some ways excluded from the full enjoyment of what this wonderful city has to offer. We don't claim to be the only representatives of these interests but we are grateful to the panel for acknowledging that the Plan must serve everyone—acknowledging it by inviting us and many of our member organisations on their own account to appear at the EiP.

The main challenge faced by all global cities is how to limit the extremes of inequality which such cities generate and (—where we can't limit them, how to mitigate the effects). Housing is a specially severe challenge because all of us live in the same or interconnected housing markets. And the challenge is specially severe in the UK because we have mostly become so passionate about protecting what we call the countryside and that makes space scarce - and thus attracts ever more speculative investment to inflate housing and land markets.

We consider that the Draft Replacement London Plan is unfit for purpose for 4 reasons :

- (i) Environmental sustainability policies and the Environmental Impact Assessment are deficient
- (ii) Its treatment of inequalities and the Equalities Impact Assessment are deficient
- (iii) The uneven playing field among stakeholders which fails to comply with the Aarhus Convention and the high importance given to community involvement in the 2004 Planning Act and in PPS 11 and 12.<sup>ii</sup>

(iv) its inadequacy as a way through the economic crisis.

On the equalities issue it is important to note that the word 'equalities' is being used in the Plan in two quite distinct senses.

(i) Inequalities of income and wealth - which have become much more severe in the UK since the 1970s, tend to be severe in global cities and are bad in London. They show up strongly in the GLA work on health inequalities, in the Hills reports on Inequality for the government (Hills 2010) in the Wilkinson and Pickett book *The Spirit Level* (2009). Many of the organisations in Just Space are passionately determined that the plan should reduce this sort of inequality: inequality of outcomes. The Mayor says it in respect of health but not elsewhere. We should all have good housing, good health, good air to breathe, parks, transport and so on. This is not the same as equality of opportunity - to change your place in the social structure. It's about the structure. Many of our representations are about narrowing this sort of structural inequality.

(ii) Inequalities in the other sense is about the differential or discriminatory experiences of specific groups in the society. Some of these groups are represented here, others not. The Mayor's State of Equality in London reports deal with these issues but we must remember that their yardstick is only to bring the experience of each equalities group up to the (still awful) London level. ROTA (Race on the Agenda) is leading on this issue. All of the Just Space groups are united on the structural issues.'

The challenges to the plan will be especially strong on its planned under-supply of affordable—and especially socially-rented—housing, the dramatic cutting (halving) of the requirement for pitches for Gypsies and Travellers, and the relaxation of borough-level housing targets. On the economy, where we have been arguing for years that GDP growth is a dangerous objective and that a wide range of economic futures should be explored, we appear to have at least secured a reluctant agreement from the GLA that they will write a paper estimating the impacts of public expenditure cuts on the viability of policies in the plan. However our arguments that the future should be radically different from the past has fallen on deaf ears, even with

the environmentalist David Fell arguing that the Mayor's references to a 'step change' needed on environmental issues contradicts the 'back to normal' trend panning on which the plan is based. In these debates so far we have often found ourselves in unison with the arguments advanced by Drew Stephenson (formerly Ken Livingstone's Planning Advisor), the Labour Members of the Assembly planning committee led by Nicky Gavron and the indefatigable London Forum of Civic and Amenity Societies led by Peter Eversden and Michael Bach.

This then is the state of play after the first phase of the EiP.

I would sum up provisionally and personally with the following observations.

European societies are experiencing deepening inequalities with potentially stronger social tensions and global cities both experience and generate these tensions most powerfully. All the mainstream political parties—albeit to varying degrees—subscribe to a neo-liberal economic orthodoxy whereby inequality persists or grows. Equally none of the mainstream parties appears to take the environmental crisis very seriously. Many will disagree with these statements, but there are enough of what Peter Marcuse calls 'the deprived and the disappointed' to constitute useful alliances, operating within and alongside the conventional party-based representative government. The Just Space Network is to a substantial degree an instance of such an alliance, working at a city-wide scale.

Its achievements so far have not been the substantial modification of the Plan: the consensus is too strong and the power too concentrated behind it. The main achievements of Just Space have been innovations in the process: it has

- encouraged more groups to respond to consultations, including ethnic minority and small local groups listed in Box 4 and on the web site. Just Space has become an important consultation channel for GLA and other London organisations;
- lobbied effectively to ensure greater representation at the EiPs
- helped groups to share ideas and views, find common ground; often this has led groups who regarded themselves as having nothing to do with planning to see the spatial and planning-related implications of their work
- enabled groups to support each other and share technical and procedural knowledge, building and widening a genuine expertise over the years
- helped develop a growing consensus and vision about better planning policies in the round
- mobilised some resources to support the work
- JSN groups had an impact at the EiP in 2007 by speaking out about a number of key themes, and also ensuring that people from local communities could speak up about the realities of planning policies as experienced by those at the receiving end. This has perhaps been a shock for the otherwise professional participants.<sup>iii</sup>

It has also been valuable for us in the university to work alongside these groups - stretching for staff and students and a small counterbalance to the hegemonic pressures which act even in universities.

Genuine citizen engagement in city planning is a long and complex process of social learning which can be intensely exciting for those concerned. A real democracy (whether direct or representative or a mixture) requires this process to be strengthened. That costs money, especially if it is to be truly open to those battling low incomes, long working hours, disabilities and other impediments. So far the necessary resources are not forthcoming. Otherwise developments are encouraging.

Will 'London after Labour' be very different? My view is that battling for social justice, better housing for all, transformed environmental policies will become even harder than before because of the crisis, its deepening by 'deficit reduction' policies and the coalition government's

attacks on social housing, housing benefits and public services generally. The "exemplary global city" which Ken Livingstone envisaged in his "vision" (Mayor, 2008) gets harder and harder to achieve. The social and environmental imperatives for effective change will certainly get stronger, however. A pre-condition for such change is that the prevailing neo-liberal orthodoxy should be subject to public challenges. This is one of them.

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<sup>i</sup> UCL was one of the universities granted money by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to promote greater 'Community Engagement' in the work of staff and students. Details at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-engagement/>

<sup>ii</sup> The UN Economic Commission for Europe Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters was signed in Aarhus in 1998 and has since been embodied in EU and UK law and practice, granting citizens rights to information and participation in matters affecting the environment. For England the government has elaborated participation procedures for the preparation of regional and local plans in PPS11 and PPS12 respectively (DCLG 2007, 2008).

<sup>iii</sup> I am indebted to Dave Morris for contributing to this list and to David Staunton, Richard Lee and the editor for other comments and stimulating discussions. None of them is responsible for the shortcomings of this rushed account.

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