

Time to level up – south of the Thames

Curiously, since he hails from Tooting, Mayor Khan seems happy to make life increasingly difficult for anyone who wants to cross the river

Planning in London has been published and edited by Brian Waters, Lee Mallett and Paul Finch since 1992

Not surprisingly, the idea of 'fairness' is being discussed widely in the context of the new world envisaged once we have all been vaccinated. Changed priorities are assumed to be a matter of course following a reassessment of what really matters in life when health is a greater priority than economic success, and fighting inequality (however defined) becomes a political consensus which will, inevitably, have consequences for planning.

One of the characteristics of current discussion about the future is the proposition that unique inequalities attached themselves to specific sectors of society, and therefore required targeted assistance. This is in direct contradiction of the long-standing mantra that public policy should be about the 'greatest good for the greatest number'.

The latter proposition is colour- and class-blind, up to a point. Facilities such as parks, libraries and swimming pools, quite apart from schools and hospitals, are available to all. They are public spaces par excellence. Any robust public planning policy should be based on the provision of community assets which are available to all – and spending should be geared to that end.

Similarly, investment in transport should surely be aimed at the creation of additional facilities for all, irrespective of sociological factors which, in any event, are never static. By the time Crossrail 2 is completed, which may be decades later than originally intended, London will be a very different city to the one we know today – in the same way that it is fundamentally different to what was envisaged when the Elizabeth Line (or Crossrail 1, even the names change) was first envisaged.

Transport infrastructure is impeccable in its neutral attitude to race, gender and class. However, decision-makers about where and what is built are, of course, subject to all the political pressures inevitable in the running of a world city.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that mayoral policies in relation to transport linking London across the Thames are based on a profound belief that the less connection, the better it is. The recent ongoing shambles over the closure of Hammersmith Bridge is only part of the story. The closure of London Bridge to ordinary road traffic and the increasing restrictions on road access to bridges generally is part of a weird policy, never explicitly stated, to make it increasingly difficult to cross the river in a convenient way unless you happen to have access to the Underground, which is massively disproportionately geared to Londoners who live north of the river.

Unsurprisingly, the anti-bridgebuilding attitude established when Sadiq Khan reversed his support for the garden bridge project has continued to blight other cross-river initiatives: not just a rational replacement for Hammersmith bridge, but also the abandonment of the Rotherhithe Park/Canary Wharf pedestrian and cycle bridge, and the recent announcement that plans for a similar bridge from Nine Elms to Pimlico are 'under review'. For which read 'scrapped'.

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Planning after the pandemic

Planning's primary function has evolved to arbitrate competing interests for land use. Yet its origins lay in envisioning better places

Now's the time in the darkest hours before a vaccinated dawn for some re-thinking amid the 'creative destruction' Covid-19 has unleashed, accelerating pre-existing trends brought on by the tech-driven 'Fourth industrial revolution'.

Nowhere more so than in urbanism and planning, with enforced localism, High Streets and big box retailing in intensive care, city cores depopulated and all bets off on whether working practices will revive or condemn them. A series of 20 podcasts launched by architects Metropolitan Workshop called *Reshaped* contains pointers for rethinking aspects of urbanism and planning.

Planning's primary function has evolved to arbitrate competing interests for land use. Yet its origins lay in envisioning better places. Our new big idea for that is ironically a suspiciously succinct French import that has slipped past customs from fog-bound Continental friends in Paris. The 15-minute neighbourhood is a lovely idea to which we can all subscribe. But as Professor Paul Chatterton of Leeds University points out in his *Reshaped* episode, it might turn out to be a super-carrier of the gentrification virus, as privileged vocal communities reap advantage while poorer communities get left behind.

And what use are self-contained 15-minute arrondissements if the transport arteries of a city like London remain fossilised in centuries-old sediments of a hub and spoke format? Without improved lateral connectivity to spread economic, social and cultural sustainability between these new neighbourhoods, will London's jaded suburbs remain fixed in aspic while the centre rots? You can't just look at a neighbourhood, you need to think about the city-wide eco-system in which it exists. But the 15-minute neighbourhood is nevertheless an opportunity to rethink planning and its primary objects in a way people can engage with.

Then there is the lip-service paid to community engagement – a term that at least has evolved from the fait accompli of 'consultation'. Several London-based speakers in the series expound the virtues of new ways to make participation meaningful. But Newham's elected mayor, Rokhsana Fiaz, has taken the idea a stage further. She describes in her episode how she is using community engagement, driven by experiences with estate residents, to shape broader policy and delivery of services.

Engagement specialist Daisy Froud also talks about the need for 'bigger public conversations' about the issues we fear most - climate change, housing, economic opportunity – to drive headline policy. Our planning system is democratic. To make it meaningful, democracy must be alive and kicking if there is to be trust in it.

And what of tech's impact on planning and urbanism? Professor Abel Maciel of the Bartlett's Faculty of the Built Environment tells the most revolutionary story. Blockchain encryption, AI and machine learning will shortly enable a world of ubiquitous digital truths that cannot be tampered with. Good news for American and democratic elections everywhere. But also transformational evidence-based tools with which to plan London and the UK. That is if it remains united. ■

*Reshaped: new thinking in planning and urbanism podcasts can be found at: <https://metwork.co.uk/prospects/reshaped>. The series is directed by **Lee Mallett***