

AFTER THE RIOTS – Mending broken London

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From Planning in London January 2012 issue 80/Yearbook

(Full length version)

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A huge physical transformation has taken place over the last three decades or so in the UK's major cities, as old industrial sites have been redeveloped and once-isolated inner-city areas have been connected up with the rest of the city. It is most obvious in areas like London Docklands, where the Docklands Light Railway took over the old arches that once carried the London and Blackwall Railway line, one of the first in the world. But the same process of regeneration has also extended to East Manchester, where one of the few trams in Britain connects up with Salford Quays, and to Croydon, where the peripheral housing estates of New Addington are now linked to the office and shopping centre of East Croydon and through to Wimbledon by a smart tram.

Looking over London

A day after the riots of August 2011 had spread through British cities, we travelled around London on the Overground, which offers a kind of 'transect' or cut through inner-city regeneration and its consequences for good and bad. We started in King's Cross and headed eastwards through to Dalston, and then to Rotherhithe, Croydon, Clapham, and Imperial Wharf in Fulham, before ending up at Gospel Oak, having gone full circle.

On the surface the achievements appear remarkable. The late 19th century terraces in North East London have been improved by their owners. Council tower blocks that once disfigured the view have gone. In place of industrial sites are new blocks of flats, many looking similar to those on the Continent, with their balconies and colourful facades. The stations have been smartened up. New heavy-rail trains, which look like Underground carriages inside, provide services every quarter of an

hour. London is connected better than it has ever been.

London Overground



The riots and looting were an inevitable backdrop to the transect. The Overground connects the neighbourhoods which saw the most serious disorder and looting – Tottenham, Clapham Junction, Mare Street in Hackney, West Croydon, and the locations of less intense disturbances, such as Dalston in Hackney and New Cross in Lewisham. Some areas not on the Overground and which have seen significant regeneration also experienced disorder, including Peckham (which will be on the Overground when it is completed in late 2012), Brixton and Woolwich. So did outer suburbs such as Ealing and Enfield.

So what was going on? Has regeneration investment been wasted? One shopper in

Clapham Junction was overheard to remark: 'What a pity they caused all this damage when the council has just laid this beautiful new paving.' Is all this physical change just a front for gentrification which leaves the deprived and disaffected in increasingly polarised ghettos, trapped on sink estates by the affluent, and itching to hit back and get their hands on what the rich have got? Setting out on a day's circuit of the Overground, these questions were very much to the fore.

The greatest changes are not just around the King's Cross Goods Yard – where the old Granary has been extended to house part of the University of the Arts – or Battlebridge Basin – where the new offices of King's Place allow those at the Guardian and Observer to work above new concert halls and art galleries – but are also in places like Dalston. A walk around the Dalston City Challenge area of the 1990s revealed how much had changed for the better. A run-down car park once notorious for drug dealing is now a fine square outside a music centre. The redevelopment of Dalston Junction station has enabled a whole new residential complex, Dalston Square (which could have come straight from Rotterdam), to be built by Barratt Homes. People were sipping lattes outside the cafes in the old Reeves Colour Works. And around the Kingsland Basin, where the landowners were once too nervous to do anything, attractive blocks of flats overlook a floating garden and weekend destination. The Overground – a reinstatement of the old railway that ran along the arches from Dalston to the City of London – had clearly helped to spark an upsurge of residential investment.

This improvement in the quality of living isn't just a superficial impression. Research newly published by Ipsos MORI shows that 71% of Inner London residents are satisfied with where they live, compared with 68% in suburbia, a remarkable change from the "flight from the cities" which initiatives like City Challenge and Lord Rogers' Urban Task Force sought to counter. All age groups are positive about urban living. This reflects a trend, with 33% of inner city types reporting that life in their area had become better, compared with 22% of suburbanites. MORI think this shift derives both from the rebirth of urban life, and the spread of suburban blight. The Cambridge Centre for Housing Research and London Councils predict that the trend will be reinforced by forthcoming changes in social and affordable rent support. The latter believes this could force up to 133,000 Inner London households on low incomes to move from homes in places where market rents are high, to the outer suburbs of

London and other towns and cities.¹

The view from the streets

In spite of this extraordinary turnaround in the majority view of inner city life, looking below the surface of our transect, all was not well. Dalston Square has triggered protests by groups opposed to further gentrification, which is seen as taking opportunities away from poorer local residents.² A business-owner on the new Gillett Square said that things are '200% better' since the square opened, yet, in spite of CCTV, this was where the looters collected before going on to raid shops. The police were alleged to have protected big businesses in the local mall rather than small shopkeepers, an action provoking anger over discrimination in terms of wealth rather than race (and which contrasts with reports that the opposite happened at Brixton). Up the road, Stoke Newington High Street largely escaped trouble thanks to bands of Turks protecting their businesses with baseball bats – something seen as a backward step in this multicultural community in which the police are expected to protect all races equally.

Hackney Co-operative Developments, the local community economic development organisation, was still much in evidence, but small shops were being turned into what would be the fifth nightclub in the area. There seems to be no authority that can any longer earn the respect of young people, who see no future for themselves and can only marvel at the contrasts. As one rioter told the Guardian/LSE: "We're angry at you now, we're angry at the people who are going to work and earning a hell of a lot more than us for doing fuck all. We're angry at banks, we're angry at high street shops that are making countless money out of us".³ The industries on which the East End was founded have nearly all gone, even in areas formerly protected by planning policy and council business development funding; and with them has disappeared any sense of purpose for those who have never worked in a structured environment.

The former East London Line takes in the buzzing cultural quarter of Hoxton and Shoreditch, where mixed use is definitely still alive and well, before diving through the tunnel with which Brunel first connected the two banks of the Thames and heading on to Rotherhithe. Walls of luxury apartments line both sides of the river and the Surrey Docks, yet Surrey Quays shopping centre was one of a number that had been

trashed.

Then the Overground travels, as in North and East London, through vast drifts of Victorian suburbia. Here it was interesting to reflect on Charles Booth's poverty maps of late 19th century London,⁴ which we saw being used as window dressing in a shop on the Caledonian Road. In Booth's time, West London was rich and East London poor, but the red and pink lines of better-off terraces often surrounded grey and black enclaves of poverty, even in the east and south. Any theory that London has become more locally polarised in recent years, and that this might be a cause for rioting and looting, has to face up to the fact that London, like New York, is a city where rich and poor have always lived cheek by jowl.

Professor Danny Dorling et al.'s mapping of poverty shows that London is now one of the most unequal cities in the world. Apart from places like Docklands and Islington, where gentrification has truly changed their character and demographics, the old patterns of deprivation are little changed at ward level. Some of the extremes have been ironed out, but there is still an intense juxtaposition of wealth and poverty which the Victorians would have recognised.⁵

Key analyses of the riots published since August 2011 seem to reinforce the significance of poverty, unemployment and associated evils as drivers for the riots. It is clear that the motivations of the rioters, as individuals and groups, were complex. Much has been made of their criminality⁶⁷, and their antagonism with the Police.⁸ The Guardian and LSE's freshly published research, based on interviews with rioters, has the virtue of including those not charged with offences, offering a broader base than the Home Office's data. They and others⁹ do point to a gulf between the police and rioters. But other, deeper, factors emerge in the Guardian/LSE study as equally significant in leading people to riot. 86% said that they took to the streets as a reaction to poverty; 79% saw unemployment as a cause; 70% wanted to redress inequality; and 85% were moved by a sense of injustice at government cuts.¹⁰ The majority of those charged were young, male and not in employment – 40% unemployed and 28% students in London. 68% of London arrestees were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds; this latter pattern was not reflected in Manchester and Salford where the ethnicity ratio was reversed.¹¹

Nowhere on our transect was the gulf between wealth and poverty more physically manifest than in West Croydon, where the Overground currently terminates. Thanks to riot damage the tram was not in operation, and the walk to East Croydon was through a desolate landscape of boarded-up buildings, empty offices, and tired pavements. Despite a succession of visions (another is newly on the stocks) for what this once-thriving commercial centre could become, the general impression was of a second-rate centre that had missed the train, as developers gave up and went elsewhere.

Clapham provides extraordinary contrasts between the council housing estates on one side of the line and the gentrified streets around fashionable Northcote Road. In between, some 26 shops had been raided, and several on the main road had been set on fire. Local people were praised as heroes for clearing up the mess the day after, and foreign television crews were recording the stories. On Lavender Hill the damage seemed fairly random – a party shop, some fast-food outlets and even a Christian bookshop, as well as the post office.

Turning the corner, Debenhams was hit badly, and in St John's Road – where the looting began¹² - the looters seemed more discerning in going for places that sold fashionable or valuable goods. It was said some came by car – they must have seemed like a swarm of locusts descending on a field. Boots was hit in every location we visited, with pharmaceuticals the target, according to staff.

Different worlds

It has been suggested by some academics that gentrification through refurbishment and through new-build are different phenomena.¹³ The former operates on a small scale and gradually, often requiring commitment to a property and a place; the latter only needs investment by developers and bankers, and purchases by people who buy a commoditised unit of accommodation without real anchors in a locality. The national newspapers certainly commented on the decline of local authorities and the huge contrasts in lifestyles as reasons for the riots.

Stopping off at Imperial Wharf in Fulham, where 2,000 luxury apartments have been built, was to see a different world. Chelsea Harbour is not even publicly accessible,

and high levels of security have created a safe haven for those making money in the City or West End. Helicopters drone overhead, and there are fine waterside gardens in which to sit out, overseen by security guards. It is unlikely that any of the rioters would have seen such a place, though some realised with hindsight that wrecking their own backyard had let their real target off the hook. “If you’re going to smash somewhere up, go Chelsea or something like that. Go somewhere where it’s got, like, richer people – the people that we don’t really like, the people we’re against” as one rioter put it.¹⁴ But our train filled up with workers who got off at Harlesden, suggesting that the new ‘pleasure domes’ do create some service jobs.

Once the Overground loops round to Willesden Junction, passing the Exhibition Halls of Earls Court, which are due to be replaced by more luxury flats, the train passes a pre-regeneration world of railway yards and industrial premises – an untidy but no doubt productive mess. Apart from there and in the walk-up estates of the East End and Clapham, it was hard to see anywhere else that those not going on to university might expect to be able to live and work in.

Conclusion – new boundaries of affluence

A single day’s transect is not enough to develop an understanding of all the complexity of the riots and looting, nor of all the richness of London’s regeneration. Maybe, though, in all the Victorian suburbia there is a clue to a significant change. The rich and poor may still live hugger-mugger, but social and economic relations are very different now from the days when short travel distances and the need for manual labour led to interdependence between rich and poor. We may still have the proximity, but alienation seems to have prevailed as our high streets have filled up with national and trans-national chains, and our high-security apartment complexes have drawn in wealthy people who aren’t local stakeholders or local employers.

Dorling has suggested that William Beveridge’s five ‘giant evils’ of squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease have been replaced by five modern ones: elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair.¹⁵ Not all of these are the prerogative of the poor, and a transect by Overground suggests that some of the original five are still lurking out there. However, just as the City Challenge in Dalston had its boundaries drawn so tightly that the poor on its doorstep could not be included, one could

conclude that the replacement of much of our physical capital, along lines which Dorling would recognise as based on housing an elite, excluding the poor and valuing in terms of greed, has been drawing new boundaries of affluence around the dispossessed.

Has this led to exclusion and despair when opportunities to share in, or earn from, this affluence have not trickled down? It would seem so. The Guardian/LSE's witnesses were pretty clear on the subject, using the Olympic Park at Stratford (also an Overground destination) as a lens to focus their anger: "It's like, because you want to host the Olympics, yeah, so your country can look better...we should suffer. I think that is not fair;" "You put 2012, that money and that kind of effort into people like me, people, like, who were in the riots, and you'll see a change". There also seems to be some scepticism about the benefits of physical regeneration: "They think: 'Oh, yeah, they've mended the buildings, everything's going to be OK. No."¹⁶ The need to create and give access to employment was a recurring theme too: "All I can tell you is that me...and the group I was in, none of us have got jobs...It felt like I need to be there...to just say: 'Look, this is what's gonna happen if there's no jobs offered to us out there'." "If I had a job I wouldn't be here now, yeah? I'd be working."¹⁷ If these are the sources of anger and frustration among the largely unemployed and young people accused of disorder and theft,¹⁸ what can be done now to restore social cohesion?

Michael Heseltine's paper to Margaret Thatcher proposing a sophisticated response to the disturbances of 1981 was called *It Took a Riot*. In reacting to the 2011 riots we should not allow police chiefs and politicians, bent on blaming mindless criminality, to confuse symptoms with causes, the mistake Heseltine avoided. To do so could lead to the loss of massive gains made through both public and private investment. We must address the remaining challenges of unemployment, poverty and disaffection. What can be done to restore social cohesion? What can be learnt from what has worked here and on the Continent? How can we retune vulnerable parts of London for this era of austerity? We conclude with five ways of making regeneration work::

1.Holistic regeneration

The strength of City Challenge and, to some extent subsequent programmes, like the

Single Regeneration Budget, was their ability to look at regeneration holistically. They could and did operate across physical, economic and social boundaries, even if they were unhelpfully restricted by geographical ones. Too often, governments have tried standard strategies which have failed to adapt well to local circumstances. Too much physical investment has been one off-repeated criticism. The last Labour government placed most of its eggs in the economic and employment basket.¹⁹ While the rioters' comments certainly endorse the importance of this dimension, it is easy now to forget how much our forlorn and abandoned inner cities used to switch off investors by their sheer dereliction. The fact is that complex problems do not get fixed by only one form of action. In Dalston the City Challenge worked across building programmes, projects to get people into work, mentoring for disaffected youths to support their education, and a range of other measures specifically targeted at that area's needs. We should learn from what City Challenge taught us about the way in which combining targeted measures and programmes can greatly increase the impact of outcomes.

2.Sustained regeneration

One of the weaknesses of City Challenge and most other regeneration programmes was the fact that they were not sustained. People-based regeneration takes longer than putting up buildings, especially in areas with the high population turnover which characterises Inner London. Most programmes came to an end too soon to effect generational change, and local expertise and confidence were rapidly lost as teams of people who had gained the trust of local communities were dispersed. Their physical legacy is remarkable, but to youths on estates untouched by aspirational opportunities, it may just be another slap in the face if there is nobody around to carry on working with them. We see the GLA setting up a team now to work on the regeneration of Tottenham. Will this be there for the long haul? If not, then it may leave another fine legacy of buildings but no real behavioural change amongst the local population.

3.Community-led regeneration

The government's proposals to engage people in forums to develop neighbourhood plans offer communities a tremendous opportunity to influence their future. However, neighbourhood forums will only deal with planning, probably with where new housing

should go. Experience both here and on the Continent shows that direct community involvement in the governance and delivery of regeneration makes it better and makes it stick. Whether through the presence of local people on the City Challenge Boards, their engagement in the management of communal space such as urban extensions in Freiberg in Germany, or their setting of local ground rules for behaviour or 'social etiquette' in multi-cultural parts of Rotterdam in Holland, ownership and results are stronger if local people have a real say in what goes on. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's response to the riots reminds us that there are plenty of precedents for this involvement extending to the kinds of people who came out on the streets in August 2011, and other forms of community enterprise.²⁰

4. New-economics regeneration


Employment areas lost to gentrified housing will not be coming back as centres of large-scale employment. They may provide bases for home workers in a more flexible economy. However, we face the pressing need to find new ways to create wealth in inner city communities and a decline in the amount of land available on which to do it. Fortunately we have opportunities too. Lord Heseltine and Sir Terry Leahy's timely report on Liverpool's future²¹ points out the coincidence between the need to improve or replace large quantities of poor quality housing and the availability of people in need of work. Admittedly an intelligent way needs to be found to connect these two issues, and to disconnect them from the consequences of changes in housing subsidy, where they apply. The City Challenges, HATs, New Deal for Communities and some Housing Market Renewal Partnerships did find ways to do this, but under old-economy conditions. More interesting now may be the emerging "civic economy" exemplified in the CUBE/NESTA sponsored report by 00:/²² which shows how liabilities for the public sector can be turned into assets by enterprising communities. This will require both public bodies and banks to rethink their business models but surely that is what regeneration has always made them do?

5. Connected regeneration

The Overground was neither the catalyst nor the cause of the riots but it does offer opportunities to the areas which it transects. In city-regions as complex as those

centred on London and the English Core Cities, local jobs are never going to be the only solution. With the loss of inner city employment land to housing, and the migration of much industry and commerce to the suburbs and beyond, connectivity will be as critical to giving people choices in the 21st Century as it was in the 19th and 20th. Even with the internet, people still get together to work and will go on doing so. Re-opening the stretch of the Overground through Shoreditch and Dalston was a long-term City Challenge objective for this very reason. Transport routes and hubs are never sufficient to guarantee economic success but they are necessary to it. Regeneration needs to focus on the specific needs of its locality, but also to ensure that the local is easily and efficiently connected to the wider world.

We could not have foreseen when we planned our grand tour of London's suburbs that it would open up insights into both the gems and the holes in thirty years of regeneration effort on quite such a critical day. As the inquest into the riots continues we conclude that an active, not a passive response is required; that we can learn from our past successes as well as the mistakes; and that we have to be open, too, to new approaches learnt from places that have escaped riots. This means using the riots to rethink the way we manage urban change, unlocking the potential in people and places, not just to locking up those caught this time.

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Notes

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³T. Newburn et al: 'Reading the Riots: 'Why be decent people? It's not getting us anywhere''. The Guardian. 6 December 2011

⁴See the Charles Booth Online Archive at <http://booth.lse.ac.uk>

⁵S. Orford, D. Dorling, R. Mitchell, M. Shaw and G. Davy Smith: 'Life and death of the people of London: a historical GIS of Charles Booth's inquiry'. *Health & Place*, 2002, Vol. 8 (1), 25-35; and D. Dorling: *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Exists*. Policy Press, 2011

⁶See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/video/2011/aug/09/david-cameron-riots-criminality-video>

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¹¹Home Office Op Cit

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¹⁴T. Newburn Op Cit

¹⁵ D. Dorling: 'All in the mind? Why social inequalities persist'. *Public Policy Research*, 2010, Vol. 16 (4), 226-31

¹⁶H. Muir and B. Ferguson. 'Spending on Games cited as unfair in age of austerity.' *The Guardian*. 7 Dec. 2011

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