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Chapter 9: London's Blue Ribbon Network: Riverside Renaissance along the Thames

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Introduction

London's riverside renaissance dates back to 1981, when Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment under Margaret Thatcher, declared London's docklands a space without local democracy (Brownhill, 1990) by replacing local government with the highly autonomous and non-elected London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC). This body was charged with using public funds to attract real estate capital into the economic vacuum created by the migration of London's dock activities to east of the city. The urban development process initiated at this point continues today, even though the LDDC was dismantled in 1998, as the collection of corporate skyscrapers clustered around the initial One Canada Square building continues to grow. This transformation of ex-industrial waterfront space into a gleaming beacon of post-industrial urbanism was replicated elsewhere, in places such as Baltimore's Inner Harbor, USA, (Harvey, 2000) and Melbourne's docklands, Australia, (Dovey, 2005); with similar entrepreneurial approaches being used to bring about renewal.

However, the riverside redevelopment that has taken place in London over the past ten years should be distinguished from earlier phases. The Thatcherite policies implemented in, and subsequently symbolised by, London Docklands are no longer rigidly adhered to. Tony Blair's New Labour government states it has taken heed of the failure of policies inspired by liberal economic theory (NAO, 1988) to produce trickle-down benefits for the poor. Consequently, it has designed a national urban policy framework (DETR, 2000) that looks to learn from the mistakes made in places such as Docklands. Add to this context the reestablishment of metropolitan government – the Greater London Authority (GLA) – in London, and subsequently the election of a socialist mayor and the creation of its own urban policies, and it is clear that the context surrounding the most recent riverside redevelopment is distinct from earlier phases.

This chapter examines this latest phase of London's riverside redevelopment. It begins by examining the urban policies developed by the new metropolitan government since 2001; specifically focusing upon the waterfront renewal vision formulated by the GLA. Following this, the type of urban development that has taken place in three Thames-side neighbourhoods under this policy framework is explored with the intention of identifying whether or not the GLA's riverside vision is being realised. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the current situation along the Thames and some thoughts about the prospects for communities affected by redevelopment.

Livingstone's London Plan and the Blue Ribbon Network

The formulation of London's urban policy – under the rubric of a 'Spatial Development Strategy' – began in May 2001 when the mayor released the *Towards a London Plan* (2001).

This served as a basis from which the mayor could consultatively develop the city's long-term vision. In this document the mayor identifies the key challenge facing the city: "London needs a strategic plan to set out policies and proposals for change to meet the many complex demands created by such growth and to ensure that all Londoners can share in the city's success" (ibid, vii). Here Livingstone points to the overwhelming tension associated with London's global city stature: how to manage London's growth in such a way that the social polarization and inequity that have deepened over the past 25 years (see Buck et al., 2002; Hamnett 2003) are reduced to just, or at least manageable, proportions?

The *Draft London Plan* (GLA, 2002) followed. This provisional document aimed to incorporate input from the consultation process and the mayor's appointed advisory team. The most notable advisors are the 'Chief Advisor to the Mayor on Architecture and Urbanism' architect Richard Rogers and Nicky Gavron 'Cabinet Advisor on Strategic Planning'. In the document's foreword, Rogers and Gavron set out their key concerns and objectives and in doing so highlight the close dovetailing of national (see Imrie and Raco, 2003) and metropolitan urban policy within the *Draft London Plan* as the rhetoric of New Labour's urban renaissance (Lees, 2003) is centrally employed:

"Urban renaissance is about making the city a place where people want to live, rather than a place from which they want to escape. A successful and sustainable city needs to be both beautiful and environmentally responsible, both compact and polycentric, with distinctive communities and neighbourhoods. But above all, it must be a fair city, respecting and celebrating the diversity of its people." (GLA, 2002, ix)

Livingstone, as some feared he would, did not therefore develop his vision for London in conflict with the national government. The final *London Plan* (GLA, 2004), published in February 2004, adhered closely to national urban policy and adopted all of the main policy directions set out in the *Draft London Plan*. The *London Plan's* principle goals are to continue the city's economic growth and global city prosperity along with reinvesting in the city's infrastructure, increasing social inclusion, and fundamentally improving London's environmental sustainability.

The mayor therefore finds few contradictions between pursuing current trajectories of economic growth and a desire for greater social inclusion. Questions about whether greater inequities are endemic to global cities are not addressed (Harvey, 2005). The challenge for the mayor has therefore become how to make significant inroads into social inequalities within an unchanged economic context. The *London Plan* ambitiously sets out to do what few cities have done and balance economic growth with sustainability and equity. It is within this context that the GLA's plans for redeveloping London's waterfront spaces – a policy programme named 'the Blue Ribbon Network' – have been formulated.

The Blue Ribbon Network first appears in the *Towards a London Plan*, where the objective of the policy is set out as: "to recognise the special character of river and canal corridors as both a strategic and a scarce resource, and address the competing needs, uses and demands that are placed on them" (p84). This initial proposal was substantially developed and expanded upon in the *Draft London Plan* where mayoral advisor Richard Rogers looked towards the River Thames as a physical feature which could be developed to bring about social inclusion: "The real heart of London is the river. Look at any satellite image and it is the Thames that dominates... It is this huge and beautiful waterway which

holds the key to revitalizing the metropolis. It must once again become a cohesive element linking communities” (GLA, 2002, iii). This statement represents a shift in the *Draft London Plan* where the Blue Ribbon Network vision moves from being purely concerned with the particularities of waterfront development and towards a wider vision where the “Blue Ribbon Network has an essential role to play in delivering all the key elements of the mayor’s vision of an exemplary sustainable world city” (ibid, p302).

These policies remain largely the same in the final *London Plan*. Now adopted, they serve two primary purposes. First, they replace pre-existing planning guidance for Thames-side development (RPG3b/9b Strategic Planning Guidance for the River Thames [Department of Environment, 1997]), helping to ensure that the particularities and strategic importance of the Thames-side are recognised in planning decisions. Second, and distinctively, waterfront spaces have been given strategic importance in the effort to deliver the entire *London Plan* vision through being recognized as under-utilised resources and spaces which can help synthesize the various elements of the mayor’s vision. The Blue Ribbon Network is therefore positioned as a strategically important synergistic tool; combining environmental, economic, planning and social policy objectives.

The Blue Ribbon Network Principles (Figure 1) provide an overview of the many policy elements which are incorporated within the mayor’s vision. They include the identification of water spaces as natural resources with important ecological functions that require protection and enhancement. Implementing the Blue Ribbon Network should therefore involve “resisting development that results in a net loss of biodiversity” and “designing new waterside developments in ways that increase habitat value” (GLA, 2004, p197). They identify bodies of water as key open spaces, alongside parks and green spaces, vital for urban liveability and flood defence. The mayor includes an urban design strategy within the programme where London’s planning authorities are instructed to “seek a high quality of design for all waterside development” and ensure that all developments “integrate successfully with the water space in terms of use, appearance and physical impact” (ibid., p209). Mirroring the national government’s emphasis on ‘good’ urban design, the policy also emphasises mixed usage, the creation of accessible and inviting public spaces along the river, and appropriate building scales.

Collectively, these objectives form an important part of the mayor’s sustainable growth programme. In order to achieve sustainable growth, the mayor has identified 28 Opportunity Areas. These are defined as areas of under-utilization, deprivation and strategic importance, and “...have been identified on the basis that they are capable of accommodating substantial new jobs or homes and their potential should be maximised. Typically, each can accommodate at least 5,000 jobs or 2,500 homes or a mix of the two, together with appropriate provision of other uses such as local shops, leisure facilities and schools. These areas generally include major brownfield sites with capacity for new development and places with potential for significant increases in density” (ibid., p41). Riverside sites account for 22 of the total 28 Opportunity Areas; demonstrating the amount of development earmarked for London’s riverside, and the importance riverside development will play in achieving the *London Plan*’s primary objectives.

Mirroring the national government’s policies, the mayor’s objectives of sustainable growth and design-led regeneration have been paired with social policies framed in terms of social exclusion/inclusion (Powell, 2000). In the fourth Blue Ribbon Network Principle, the mayor identifies an accessible, regenerated and enriched waterfront as an important element in the effort to “promote social inclusion and tackle deprivation and

discrimination” (GLA, 2004, p194). Through a combination of directing urban development to Opportunity Areas, well-designed spaces, and enriched waterfront environments, the mayor sees the Blue Ribbon Network as an important tool in dealing with London’s social problems. Although these objectives are praiseworthy, they do stop short of providing direct benefits – excluding limited affordable housing – to London’s socially excluded residents. The Blue Ribbon Network proposals therefore continue with programmes that foresee indirect benefits – such as those provided through localized economic growth, planning gains and improved urban environments – as the principle means of alleviating social exclusion.

Figure 1: The Blue Ribbon Network Principles (GLA, 2004, p193-4)

- To accommodate London’s growth within its boundaries without encroaching on green spaces, policies should make the most sustainable and efficient use of space in London, by protecting and enhancing the multi-functional nature of the Blue Ribbon Network so that it enables and supports those uses and activities that require a water or waterside location.
- To make London a better city for people to live in, policies should protect and enhance the Blue Ribbon Network as part of the public realm contributing to London’s open space network. Opportunities for sport, leisure and education should be promoted. The Blue Ribbon Network should be safe and healthy and offer a mixture of vibrant and calm places.
- To make London a more prosperous city with strong and diverse economic growth, policies should exploit the potential for water-borne transport, leisure, tourism and waterway support industries. The attractiveness of the Blue Ribbon Network for investment should be captured by appropriate waterside development and regeneration. This will include the restoration of the network and creation of new links.
- To promote social inclusion and tackle deprivation and discrimination, policies should ensure that the Blue Ribbon Network is accessible for everyone as part of London’s public realm and that its cultural and environmental assets are used to stimulate appropriate development in areas of regeneration and need.
- To improve London’s accessibility, use of the Blue Ribbon Network for water-borne transport of people and goods (including waste and aggregates) should be increased. Alongside the Blue Ribbon Network there also opportunities for pedestrian and cycling routes.
- To make London a more attractive, well-designed and green city, policies should protect and enhance the biodiversity and landscape value of the Blue Ribbon Network. The network should also be respected as the location of a rich variety of heritage that contributes to the vitality and distinctiveness of many parts of London. London must also have reliable and sustainable supplies of water and methods of sewage disposal and a precautionary approach must be taken to the risks created by global warming and the potential for flooding.

This may reflect the fact that the mayor’s most powerful redistributive tool continues to be his ability to negotiate planning gains beyond those recommended by

central government (McNeill, 2002). His goal of 35% affordable housing for all new developments exceeds the national government's 25% target. Therefore, given his limited fiscal powers, the promotion of continued economic growth and urban development, and consequently increased numbers of affordable housing units, offers Livingstone one of a few means of providing direct benefits to London's poorest residents. Taking into account the amount of development earmarked for waterfront spaces in Opportunity Areas, the riverside will therefore be central in attempts to combat social exclusion.

This intent is evident in the *London Plan* where the mayor sets out his ambition to see the city's waterfronts developed for all Londoners, not just the city's growing legion of high-earners:

"The Blue Ribbon Network should not continue to be developed as a private resource or backdrop, which only privileged people can afford to be near to or enjoy. It provides many different opportunities for enjoyment, some actively involving the water and others simply benefiting from the calm and reflective feeling of being near water. Both active and passive activities can contribute to towards improving the health of Londoners" (GLA, 2004, p207)

This commitment to stop the Blue Ribbon Network becoming purely the preserve of the wealthy came after the London Assembly, the body elected to oversee the mayor, published a report entitled '*Access to the Thames: Scrutiny of the Thames Foreshore and Path*' (London Assembly, 2003). In this, they heavily criticised the exclusive forms of urban development which had continued to take place since 2000. In particular, the committee was alarmed at the manner and pace with which developers have privatised waterfront spaces and limited access to Thames-side pathways:

"The Committee is concerned that the Thames is being barricaded from the rest of London by riverside developments that fail to consider how they relate to the river and its immediate hinterland. New riverside developments do normally make provision for a riverside path but such provision is compromised if the path is only a part of a river frontage made up of identikit apartment blocks." (ibid. p1)

The committee urged Livingstone to ensure all future riverside developments make adequate riverside access provisions in order to have the riverside become a space which all Londoners can enjoy.

Recently, riverside redevelopment has therefore taken place under an ambitious urban policy vision that sees the city's waterways and waterfronts becoming integral to Londoners lives, and a significant part of the effort to maintain economic growth and reduce social exclusion. The remainder of this chapter critically examines some of the redevelopment that has taken place. It analyses the urban spaces created by riverside residential developments and finds the benefits of reduced spatial segregation have been mitigated by an excluding architecture. Following this, interviews with riverside residents are used to show how those living in new residential developments have largely failed to become incorporated into local communities; therefore posing questions over the ability of current policies to bring Londoners 'together' and provide social benefits beyond those received by the few lucky enough to access affordable housing.

The Blue Ribbon Network Realised?

This section draws upon research conducted in three riverside neighbourhoods – Wandsworth (Southwest London), Brentford (West London) and Thamesmead West (Southeast London) – situated across London. Each of them has experienced a significant amount of redevelopment over the past ten years. In Wandsworth, a number of riverside sites, including a derelict gas works, flour mill and power station, have been remediated and redeveloped into prime residential space. A similar story of redevelopment has occurred in Brentford, where a large gas works and dock facilities have been replaced by a string of apartment complexes. Over in Southeast London, a vast swath of riverside land once used as a naval arsenal is being transformed into a residential and commercial space. This has involved both the renovation of old arms storage houses and the construction of new residential apartments. The new residential spaces that have replaced brownfield and industrial facilities have all been built by corporate real estate developers along the Thames. These spaces have all taken the form of high-density, multi-storey apartment complexes. Whilst each of the neighbourhoods has witnessed multiple residential developments, this study selected one particular development from each: 517 unit Riverside West (Berkeley Homes plc.) in Wandsworth, 234 unit Capital West (Barratt Homes plc.) in Brentford, and 414 unit Royal Artillery Quays (Barratt Homes plc.) in Thamesmead West (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Images of the Thames-side Developments Studied

From top clockwise: Riverside West (Wandsworth), Royal Artillery Quays (Thamesmead West) and Capital West (Brentford)



Riverside Development

Corporate developers, such as Berkeley Homes plc., St George plc. and Barratt Homes plc, have been central to the riverside's reinvention for a number of reasons. The scale of ex-industrial brownfield sites along the riverside and the amount of remediation often needed to make these spaces safe for inhabitation requires significant capital expenditures and an expertise in large project construction which only they possess. In addition, since national and metropolitan urban policy requires compact, high-density development the amount of housing earmarked for riverside sites naturally positions them towards those capable of constructing large apartment complexes. Finally, corporate developers have been almost completely responsible for recent riverside development because prospective investment returns mean demand for sites is high, and as a result, these actors use their capital resources to outbid smaller actors.

At both Capital West (Brentford) and Royal Artillery Quays (Thamesmead West), affordable housing has been provided. Riverside West (Wandsworth) does not contain any affordable housing; due to initial planning permission being granted before legislation became enacted and a local authority resistant to any form of social housing (Dowding et al. 1999), and a series of subsequent planning decisions that have seen Riverside West expand without affordable housing being made required. In Capital West, 27% of all housing units (64) are affordable; whilst at Royal Artillery Quays 21% of the development (82 units) are affordable. However, the social composition of affordable units varies between the developments. The Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) defined affordable housing as: "...both low cost market housing, and subsidised housing (irrespective of tenure, ownership or financial arrangements) that will be available to people who cannot afford to occupy houses generally available on the local market" (DETR, 1998). This definition has allowed a significant amount of flexibility over what comprises affordable housing (Pawson and Kintrea, 2002), and whom is eligible for it; something that was highlighted as a problem in the ODPM's review of affordable housing provision in the South East of England (ODPM, 2003) because it allows local governments to excessively manipulate the urban renaissance vision (DETR, 1999) of socially mixed neighbourhood communities. At Capital West, eligibility for affordable housing has been limited to key workers and social housing applicants, and therefore is mainly inhabited by public sector workers and extremely low-income groups. In contrast, Moat Housing, the housing association responsible for affordable housing at Royal Artillery Quays, has been given an 'open' eligibility criteria from Greenwich Borough Council. This has meant a wide array of income groups have been granted access to affordable housing under shared ownership agreements.

Despite affordable housing requirements, recent redevelopment has had an overwhelming upgrading effect on the social composition of the riverside; gentrifying much of the waterfront (Davidson and Lees, 2005). Using survey data collected in the three study areas, together with occupational data¹ from the 2001 census, the total

¹ The main occupational categories used in the UK census are: Managers and Senior Officials, Professional, Associate Professional and Technical, Administrative and Secretarial, Skilled Trades, Personal Service, Sales and Customer Service, Process, Plant and Machine, and Elementary.

upgrading effect of riverside development can be estimated. In Brentford, Capital West alone has increased the ward's population of Managers and Senior Officials by 20% and Professionals by 15%. Presuming other newly-built riverside developments in Brentford (e.g. Ferry Quays/Brentford Lock/The Island) have similar occupational profiles, riverside development will have increased the ward's population of Managers and Senior Officials by 70% and Professionals by 52%. In the Wandsworth borough ward of Fairfield, Riverside West has increased the population of Managers and Senior Officials by 13% and Professionals by 27%. Once completely inhabited, the neighbouring development Battersea Reach will increase these figures to 24% and 50% respectively. Finally, in the Glyndon ward of Greenwich, Royal Artillery Quays has increased the population of Professionals by 59% and Associate and Technical Professionals by 12%. When completed, the neighbouring 1223 unit Royal Arsenal development will likely increase this upgrading threefold.

This movement of middle class people into working class neighbourhoods, such as Brentford and Thamesmead West, has certainly brought some of London's different social groups into closer proximity. Yet, whilst affordable housing provisions have addressed the needs of some, it is unclear whether the redevelopment has accrued further benefits, reduced social exclusion, or created the kinds of urban spaces and inclusive communities envisaged in the Blue Ribbon Network. In the following sections, two elements of riverside redevelopment relevant to these queries will be examined: (i) the types of urban spaces created, and (ii) the types of communities that are developing. These two elements are focused upon not only due to their significance in national and metropolitan policy agendas, but also because the creation of inclusive spaces and communities is pivotal to the avoidance of displacement due to gentrification along the riverside. If riverside redevelopment simply achieves the gentrification of the riverside without any significant benefits for the existing resident low-income communities, the Blue Ribbon Network may become an unfulfilled policy vision which, at best fails to address London's social inequity and exclusion, and, at worst exacerbates pressing social problems through imposing the unjust negative consequences of gentrification (see Lees, Slater and Wyly, 2007) upon the very same communities targeted by social inclusion programmes.

The Physical Transformation of the Riverside

“They can play tennis on the all weather court, relax in the sauna and order theatre tickets, limousines and even maids through the porter's lodge. Best of all, they don't have to share any of these luxuries with their neighbours: a security barrier at the entrance to the grounds ensures that the hoi polloi in the council estates across the road will stay where they belong. This is, in other words, the antithesis of the development the government's Urban Task Force wants to promote.” (Monbiot, 1999, Guardian, 24 June)

Above the journalist George Monbiot, describing the Richard Rogers-designed Montevetro riverside development in Battersea, Southwest London, provides an account of the types of urban spaces that have been constructed along the Thames, and indeed the stark contrast between them and the urban policy objectives of national government. It raises the question of how the façade of renewal generated by riverside redevelopment and the attraction of capital-rich groups to working class neighbourhoods may *not* result in new

forms of community and reduced social exclusion. This section examines the architectures employed at recently-constructed riverside developments to show how this has stifled the ability of affordable housing legislation to do anything beyond serving the immediate housing needs of those granted access to it. It argues that if the Blue Ribbon Network programme is to use the development opportunities along the riverside to either create attractive and accessible public spaces and/or help reduce inequities and poverty, current approaches have to be changed.

Gated communities have become a particularly symbolic part of the post-industrial urban landscape (Low, 2003). They are continually criticised by community activists for having damaging social effects and contributing to the introversion of urban life. Yet, at the same time, demand for them appears unabated as developers continue to incorporate all manner of security features into developments. London's riverside is no exception to this. Although current planning legislation controls against the most extreme forms of gated developments seen elsewhere (Alvarez-Rivadulla, 2007), segregating architectural designs and security technologies are constant features along the riverside. The result is segregation between those living in privately-owned, market housing in riverside developments and both affordable housing residents and surrounding neighbourhood residents.

At Capital West, the separation of affordable housing from privately-owned housing is stark and has contributed to class-based divisions within the development. Affordable housing has been provided in the form of a stand-alone apartment block of 64 units on a site close to the riverside. It stands just ten metres from market apartment blocks, yet interviews with affordable housing residents show they feel almost completely segregated from the community opposite. One reason consistently referred to by affordable housing residents was the physical segregation within the development. The most visible symbol of this segregation is an eight-foot steel fence and gate that encloses the market housing, separating it both from the surrounding neighbourhood and the block of affordable housing adjacent (see Figure 3). This dividing mechanism is accompanied by a speaker-phone security system, an onsite security patrol, numerous warning signs, private fenced garden spaces, and CCTV cameras.

An affordable housing resident at Capital West explained how the fencing and gates within the development had the effect of dividing space and consequently communities:

“I just tend to drive in and come up to the flat... I mean, why would I go through the front gates? You can't walk through or anything and I don't feel like it is my space. I guess I just never run into anyone over there, so I never end up having a chat... It is the opposite of what it is like in these flats. I have gotten to know people going up and down in the lifts.”

Whilst residents of the privately-owned housing were not unsurprisingly less critical of the security features at Capital West given their housing choice, interviews did reveal mixed feelings over them. In particular, the use of gates and restricted entry systems were viewed with ambiguity by some:

“I have mixed feelings about the security features onsite. I like the speakers, patrol and gates because I know my girlfriend is more safe, but I also think it is not very

good socially. You know, it separates out people and definitely produces a ‘them and us’ feeling.”

The reference made here to ‘them and us’ was a distinction also fostered by the onsite facilities offered only to residents of the privately-owned housing in Capital West. This situation was repeated in all developments. The most common of these facilities was the fitness centre, but they also included lifestyle management services, dry cleaning services, crèches and beauticians. The affordable housing residents interviewed consistently talked about not being able to access these facilities and they were critical of the ways in which onsite concierge/security guards policed entry to them.

The public spaces constructed in and around the riverside developments have also caused segregation between the new developments and surrounding communities. In direct contrast to the Blue Ribbon Network vision, riverside developers have tended not to provide the kinds of spaces along the riverside which either contribute to the city’s stock of public spaces or provide somewhere people want to visit. At Capital West, the immediate area surrounding the apartment complex is gated, and therefore the direct contribution to public space is negligible. However, as part of Section 106 planning gain, the developer Barratt Homes plc. was required to contribute to the renovation of a public park on the neighbouring riverside. Although interviews in the community suggested usage of the area is limited by fear of crime, this development has therefore contributed to a marginal improvement, if not addition, to riverside public space. At the other two developments, contributions to the Blue Ribbon Network spatial vision are less tangible.

Riverside West consists of four large apartment complexes that face onto the Thames. Access to the development is not restricted by large gates and fencing as at Capital West. Indeed, one is free to walk into the development’s public spaces without hindrance. However, architectural design and security features severely restrict Riverside West’s contribution to the Blue Ribbon Network. Access to the development, and as a result the riverside, involves bypassing a security guard office at the main entrance area or using uninviting narrow alleyways (Figure 3) that lack footpaths. Highly visible CCTV cameras positioned around these areas ensure a panoptican effect and give the riverside space in front of apartment buildings a distinctly private character; something furthered by the fact there has been no pedestrian throughway provided along the riverside. At Royal Artillery Quays, subtle forms of exclusionary architecture are replaced by explicit types. Here, steel gates are used to completely restrict access to the riverside spaces in front of the development (Figure 3). Paired with more CCTV cameras and security patrols, this development is an archetypal gated community.

The most explicit example of architectural segregation observed occurred in Brentford, where a developer had gone to significant lengths to separate privately-owned properties from affordable housing and public spaces. The developer acquired derelict docks abutting the Grand Union Canal where it meets the Thames. As with all new developments under current legislation, approximately 25% of the units were required to be ‘affordable,’ and therefore it promised a mixed community. Yet, the developer sub-contracted some site construction, notably including affordable housing provisions, to another developer and reserved a small section of land for its own development. The site they chose was a former-dock area that is separated by the Grand Union Canal from the rest of the purchased land and the wider neighbourhood (see Figure 3). The effect of this has been to completely segregate the central development from affordable housing and the

adjacent communities. It therefore negates any benefits which might have been accrued from incorporating a range of tenure types within the same development. Indeed, the developer marketed its exclusive collection of private housing as ‘The Island’!

Riverside development has therefore segregated tenure types and produced riverside spaces that rarely bring the Thames into London’s collection of open spaces. Developers have sought to colonize and privatize the riverside, and therefore have not contributed to the mayor’s Blue Ribbon Network vision. They have also built a collection of gated communities to ease concerns over the suitability of some working class riverside neighbourhoods for the market of young professionals they have targeted with one and two bedroom apartments. Yet despite this, recent riverside development has undoubtedly brought different social classes together in close spatial proximity. It is therefore important to examine the types of neighbourhood communities that are beginning to form along the Thames and consider whether the social inclusion agendas of both national and metropolitan governments are being served by these recent urban changes.

Figure 3: Gated Architectures along the Thames

From top right clockwise: Security gates separating housing tenures at Capital West; Eastern alleyway entrance to Riverside West; Locked gates restricting access to riverside areas at Royal Artillery Quays; and the Grand Union Canal dividing ‘The Island’ development from the sub-contracted affordable housing development.



Mixing between communities: Is the neighbourhood vision being realised?

The promise of Opportunity Areas and socially mixed neighbourhoods lies in the prospect that targeted redevelopment and reduced spatial segregation might allow greater numbers of Londoners to share in the benefits of London's economic growth. Riverside development has certainly changed class propinquity in London, bringing a number of social groups together along the Thames. It can therefore be claimed that recent Thames-side development is achieving Richard Rogers vision of 'bringing London's communities together' and helping bring about growth in the mayor's Opportunity Areas. However, if current policies are to significantly reduce social exclusion, these developments should be generating a host of indirect benefits, such as employment opportunities, better jobs, reinvestment in public services and neighbourhood improvements. If socially excluded groups are to 'receive' these benefits, then the class divisions which generate exclusion will have to be reduced. This may take the form of, for example, expanded social networks that grant better access to economic opportunities or re-balanced and politically-empowered

neighbourhood communities. Yet, if class divisions remain and the benefits of reduced spatial segregation and local development are not spread to low-income groups, then the riverside will likely only feature spatially juxtaposed, 'socially tectonic' (Butler and Robson, 2003) communities.

In the three case study areas, a series of interviews with residents of both riverside developments and the surrounding communities revealed that in both Brentford and Thamesmead West, riverside development had resulted in almost no social mixing between new and existing residents. Wandsworth had a slightly different pattern of social interaction, with some neighbourhood residents having developed relationships with those Riverside West residents who had become users of neighbourhood amenities. However, this interaction had not taken place across class lines and had been focused in a small section of gentrified space within the surrounding neighbourhood. The riverside developments have not led to the formation of a socially mixed community. Rather, the lifeworlds of many new residents simply bore little relation to those in the surrounding areas. The differing perception of the utility of the local neighbourhood between these two groups was a striking example of this.

The privately-owned housing residents within the new riverside developments did not see the local area as offering appropriate or desirable retail, public, social and leisure facilities; in particular amenities like restaurants, clubs, shops and entertainment venues. Instead, they often gravitated towards Central London and beyond the city. This meant most residents of Capital West and Royal Artillery Quays had very little knowledge of their surrounding neighbourhood beyond occasionally using convenience shops and restaurants. In developments where these amenities had been provided onsite, such as at Riverside West, residents barely used local shops and restaurants at all. This provided a curious example of where the mixed usage planning agendas of national and metropolitan governments was serving to mitigate their social policy goals since the commercial premises within the development were removing the requirement that new residents to use neighbourhood facilities, therefore reducing neighbourhood-based social interactions.

Riverside West was the exception to this scene of mismatched lifeworlds. Here, some residents had become incorporated into the Wandsworth area, albeit within a small geographical space. A collection of Victorian housing, known locally as The Tonsley's, had undergone significant gentrification over the past 20 years and as a result has developed a strip of high-end retail services. These were frequented by both neighbourhood and Riverside West residents, representing a point of social and spatial confluence. This led to both social relations developing between the two communities and feelings of separation being much less than in the other study areas. Indeed, it was possible to identify a shared sense of place between these two groups; especially so when they both made reference to the wider Wandsworth area, which both thought largely run-down and unsuitable for their needs. But, this hardly represents a success for urban policy – the Blue Ribbon Network achieved – given these neighbouring gentrifiers are not forming a socially mixed community; rather newly arrived gentrifiers in riverside developments are maintaining processes of gentrification which will continue to erode the area's social diversity.

Interview data suggested a number of reasons as to why spatial proximity has not led to new neighbourhood communities. Although all of these reasons cannot be covered here (see Davidson [under review]) it is important to briefly note a major point of distinction between the two counterpoised communities. The pre-existing neighbourhood residents explained that their common points of interactions, such as local schools, public

amenities and public spaces, had not become frequented by the new residents. Although interviews with some development residents refuted assertions of a complete disregard for such local affairs, many did have limited local interests. Most of the interviewees living in the private units in riverside developments did not have children, were single or couples aged 25-35, and worked in professional jobs outside of the immediate area. They spent much of their leisure time socialising in Central London or outside London, and expected to have relatively short-term residency within the development (3-5 years). The consequence of this was a dramatically different perception about the utility of the local neighbourhood between development and neighbourhood residents. For many residents of the surrounding neighbourhood, their lives were intricately bound with local spaces. Their children used local schools; they bought at local shops; they ate at local restaurants; some were involved in local politics. This is not to say that they only had local social networks; they also had many other diffuse associations. Rather, it is the distinct absence of local associations for many of the development residents that distinguished the two populations. The lifestages and lifestyles of new riverside residents therefore meant their relationships with 'neighbourhood' spaces were quite unsuitable for involvement in the urban policy neighbourhood vision.

The reasons behind this are complex and varied. However, it is important to recognise how the type of built environment constructed along the Thames has contributed in large measure to the creation of these social tectonics (Butler and Robson, 2003). The vast majority of new housing units along the Thames are luxury one and two bedroom flats. This has meant that riverside developments have been particularly attractive to a demographic that tends not to look towards neighbourhood-based resources. For example, development residents would often make reference to the impetus that having children might have in encouraging them to be more interested and concerned with local affairs and to use local amenities. Yet, their current residencies are perceived to be highly unsuitable for children:

“I don't think you could have kids here [Riverside West]. I mean, I could not see us have them here. You need a garden and that stuff... We rent here. Probably will for a year or so yet, but once we decide to have kids, we will have to move... Knowing you are likely to shift somewhere does mean you're less concerned with the area. Some people are, but local issues... are not really worth the bother.”

The distinctive type of residential development along the Thames has therefore contributed to the juxtaposed lifeworlds described above through overwhelmingly providing housing for a very particular demographic.

Conclusions

The research conducted in these three Thames-side neighbourhoods has shown that the inclusive spaces and society envisaged in the Blue Ribbon Network policy are not being realised. This stated it is important to insert two caveats. First, the Blue Ribbon Network vision embodies a whole set of other objectives, such as biodiversity protection and transit development, which are being implemented independently of the development examined here. The criticisms here are therefore not a condemnation of the entire programme. Second, it should be recognised that the research presented here can only offer a snapshot of these new developments. Most riverside developments have only been inhabited for

around five to ten years, and the types of redevelopment, indirect social benefits and communities envisioned in policy documents will almost certainly take longer to develop. In this concluding section, I therefore want to offer some thoughts on the future prospects for London's riverside.

The redevelopment of brownfield riverside space into desirable residential space has certainly brought new life to areas of blight along the Thames. In addition, an influx of affluent residents to riverside neighbourhoods also offers a boost for local economies. For some riverside communities, the long-term effects of riverside renaissance may be positive; even if they do not substantially readdress social inequities. However, the influx of high earners and capital reinvestment to previously working class neighbourhoods carries with it a significant threat of gentrification; and subsequently displacement. There are already signs of this occurring as the social composition of riverside areas has become progressively more middle class over the past 15 years (see Davidson and Lees, 2005). With the exception of Thamesmead West where Royal Artillery Quays was surrounded by aesthetically-unpleasing social housing, many development residents stated they had become more open to the idea of moving into the local neighbourhood as their lifestyle changed. Indeed, many owner-occupiers stated an important consideration for buying their apartment was the fact they, and others, considered the riverside neighbourhood 'up-and-coming'. This is certainly an idea embraced by real estate agents. Brentford is in the process of being re-branded 'Brentford-upon-Thames', mimicking nearby bourgeois Kingston-upon-Thames; whilst Wandsworth's infamous downtown shopping centre has also been subject to re-branding and tenancy by the up-market grocery store Waitrose, providing a stark juxtaposition with neighbouring discount retailers.

If gentrification continues along the Thames, and at present there is nothing to suggest it will not, then many low-income residents are likely to experience greater and greater displacement pressures as housing costs rise, friends and neighbours disperse, local shops reorient to new clients, and local politics shift. Of course, all of this relies upon the continuing class disparities which exist along the Thames-side. Gentrification, and consequential displacement, could be halted or mitigated if the class-based differences that drive these processes are reduced. If socially-excluded and low-income groups do receive benefits from current policy initiatives – such as better paid and more secure jobs, and political empowerment – then they will be better able to absorb rising housing costs, support their preferred commercial facilities and control political change. The onus is therefore upon the social inclusion agenda enshrined in the Greater London Plan. If detrimental changes are not to occur and the Blue Ribbon Network is not to become the reserve of London's bourgeois professionals, the GLA must adequately address London's growing social inequities.

Since the GLA's urban policy programmes are largely reliant upon the indirect benefits of economic growth – the same type of economic growth that has significantly contributed to current problems (see Harvey, 2005) – this issue will be a difficult one to deal with. Beyond affordable housing provisions, metropolitan urban policy has not attempted to make direct interventions to reduce social exclusion. This is reflected along the Thames. Redevelopment and growth has been generated in many riverside neighbourhoods, yet this shows few signs of alleviating social exclusion or providing benefits for marginalised groups. Furthermore, the widespread gentrification that has resulted along the Thames may deepen social exclusion. If the Blue Ribbon Network is therefore to become a space which unites London's communities, plays a part in

addressing the city's disgraceful social inequities, and develops into an attractive public space, then a significantly greater commitment to dealing with the causes of social exclusion has to be made. Surely then, London would truly be able to claim itself to be an exemplary 'sustainable world city'.

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