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The People's Plan for the Royal Docks

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By the start of the 1980s, the future of London's Docklands looked bleak. Cargo containerisation, larger ships, and the emergence of post-Fordist production meant that from the late sixties, almost every dock would close. However, the area had caught the imagination of private investors and conservative politicians, with one developer proclaiming it to be 'a blank canvas upon which we can paint the future.' With considerable help from the Thatcher Government's London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), almost 5,000 acres of publicly-owned land was acquired in an ambitious scheme to relocate a portion of the City's overcrowded financial centre, and turn the Docklands into an international commercial hub.

The creation of the country's first ever 'Enterprise Zone' in the Isle of Dogs was a major part of this, with market controls, planning permissions and taxes heavily reduced or abolished to attract investment. Historian **Sam Wetherell** has called these zones 'the neoliberal city's purest policy expression,' with local authorities, along with the 52,000 residents of the Docklands, losing their right to have a say in the area's future.

It was out of this moment that two distinct plans for the future of the Docklands emerged. The first, formulated by politicians, planners and businessmen, would result in a radical regeneration project serving the interests of a Thatcherite, monetarist agenda. The transformation of the East End skyline over the past forty years, dominated now by the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf at the old West India Docks, is perhaps the boldest material legacy of these ideas.

The second plan for the Docks, perhaps little-known today, would never materialise. In 1981, with the final closure of the Royal Docks in Newham, a local forum of tenants' associations, trade unions and voluntary groups approached the Greater London Council for help. At this point an explicitly socialist administration which valued popular participation in politics, the GLC was the antithesis of Thatcherism, and happily provided funding to support the struggle against LDDC plans.

In April 1983, with GLC support, a People's Plan Centre was opened in an old shop unit in Silvertown, Newham. Here, GLC-appointed officials included the feminist scholar Hilary Wainwright, who brought her experience in workers' organisation and planning during the creation of the **Lucas Plan.** Using the Plan Centre as a base, GLC 'Popular Planning' officers like Wainwright worked with local people initially in response to the proposed building of London City Airport, a key element of the LDDC regeneration project. The product of this work would be 'The People's Plan for the Royal Docks', which both critiqued the idea of the airport, and suggested a broader, alternative vision of community-led development within its forty pages, putting people's needs and aspirations at its heart.

Newham Docklands Forum and GLC Popular Planning Unit
Design by Docklands Community Poster project, 1983.

The history of *The People's Plan* is important for two reasons. For one, it serves as a reminder that community-focused alternatives existed to the encroachment of finance capital over urban policy. The knowledge that the fate of the area was not as fixed as it might appear to us today, especially in the minds of the local people who lived and worked there, has profound historical and political implications.

Moreover, *The People's Plan* diagnoses the problems facing the Docklands in depth, and suggests alternatives responding to the dislocations of post-Fordism, all through the method of direct community engagement. A reassessment of the plan's history provides valuable insights to those working in a moment where austerity measures, privatisation and government outsourcing often dominate urban planning.

The People's Plan showed how the crisis of unemployment under Thatcher, reaching an all-time high of three million in 1983, was mirrored at the Docks. Recognising this, it described itself as 'first and foremost about jobs.' With a quarter of men in Newham now

unemployed, it noted the sense of 'desperation' leading some to accept the airport as their only hope for employment. Yet in recording the 'hopes and ambitions' of local people, *The People's Plan* reclaimed the language of 'aspiration' away from Thatcherite individualism in its arguments, declaring: 'We [...] believe that there must be more to our working lives, and our children's, than being porters and lavatory attendants for passing businessmen.' Instead, ship repair, cargo handling, container distribution, and industrial workshops in warehouses could all provide jobs using existing local skills and infrastructure.

Inspired by the principle of 'socially useful production' developed in the Lucas Plan, a Docklands Co-operative Zone would challenge the LDDC's own Enterprise Zone. Through this, workers' co-operatives could create 'socially useful' products like electronic aids for disabled people, and new technology for council houses. This would form a supply chain for the GLC's works department, using GLC purchasing power for investment. The 6,000 local women on the dole or unable to work due to childcare responsibilities (the area had no full-time nurseries) were also identified in this plan. Full-time childcare for under-fives, creating over 1,000 jobs in itself, was one modest proposal which would allow women to pursue careers, hobbies and social lives previously out of reach.

© Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, Docklands Community Poster Project, 1982-5. The eighth and last image from the first sequence of photo-murals from 'The Changing Picture of Docklands', exploring issues surrounding the re-development of the London Docklands from the viewpoint of local communities.

But it also went further than job creation. Newham Docklands had some of the worst council houses in the country; lacking basic amenities, they were often unfit for residents' needs. It was argued that homes are 'the foundations of which a community is built', but council houses had often been seen as 'dormitories' for workers by the local authority. While the LDDC's focus was on luxury developments in the Docklands, *The People's Plan* recognised that (with 5,300 people on the waiting list) there was an 'urgent need' for more, and better, social housing. This was a vital document in describing the kinds of homes that residents *actually* wanted. Living in crumbling tower blocks or Victorian terraces, there was a local appetite for the style of low-rise, low-density modern housing in postwar 'New Towns' like Milton Keynes, with ample gardens and green spaces. Idyllic leisure activities for inner-city families were imagined too: canoeing, fishing, and watersports making use of their proximity to the river.

The campaign surrounding *The People's Plan* involved one of the most fascinating and vibrant examples of cultural politics in London at the time. The GLC had been approached by The Docklands Community Poster Project – a group of local tenants and

activists joined by two artists, Lorraine Leeson and Peter Dunn, and agreed to fund a sophisticated PR campaign opposing the LDDC's regeneration narrative.

As well as creating *The People's Plan's* front cover, the project produced a sequence of billboards narrating their struggle. These billboards gave voice to a defiant community, with one stating: 'Although the people have never owned the land, they've lived on it, worked on it, died on it. It is their heritage – it should be their future.' Another image addressed the area's housing crisis, making reference to the **1968 Ronan Point** tower block explosion, which killed three people, in Newham. Others alluded to the area's radical history, with one linking the Dock Strike of 1889 with their own fight: 'The People of Docklands have always had to make the best of appalling conditions – and to change them.'

This campaign was joined by several 'People's Armadas,' where the community compiled a charter of demands which were delivered to Parliament by 1,000 people travelling on rented pleasure boats down the river. Their emblem became a dragon, curved in the shape of the Thames, which was also adopted by their allies – the striking Miners – in a show of solidarity.

The financial and political heft of the LDDC, along with Thatcher's abolition of the GLC in 1986, meant that they were able to steamroll through with their plans for regenerating the area. *The People's Plan* would never be realised.

However, both it and the Docklands Community Poster Project's work were able to galvanise the community, whilst shifting the public narrative – the LDDC's plans were widely considered much more controversial after the project's efforts, and meaningful community participation would become more common in regeneration plans.

Moreover, it was GLC-endorsed projects like *the People's Plan* and its attendant cultural campaigns which so excited New Left thinkers like Stuart Hall. Their combination of post-Fordist analysis with creative participatory politics seemed to be a way of moving beyond the stagnation of the Left in the 1970s. As Hall wrote in *The Hard Road to Renewal,* attempts such as this, in the 'transformation of the spaces of the city' away from the interests of capital, would be crucial prefigurations for ideas about 'living in the twenty-first century.'

Photo © Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, Docklands Community Poster Project, 1984.

The struggle over Docklands is representative of the potential within what Hall identified as a crucial historical 'conjuncture' facing Britain in the seventies and eighties. And as Owen Hatherley writes in **his most recent book,** today's London is, 'more than anything else', the consequence of the GLC's abolition by Thatcher, along with the 1986 'Big Bang' deregulating the stock market. This episode of Docklands history is directly linked to these two events, and the story of its spatial politics in the 1980s helps to explain the dystopian future of contemporary London, haunted by extinguished radical possibilities in Laura Grace Ford's **Savage Messiah**.

It is through uncovering alternative plans for living and for cities, still alive in historical struggles surrounding documents like *The People's Plan*, that we can find inspiration in the current moment: ideas for what Mark Fisher called **'an alternative modernity'**, piercing the neoliberal logic of development which risks defining our recent history.

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