
Introduction

Slide 1 In this paper, I'm going to describe some aspects of the development of housing in London's Docklands between the 1970s and late 90s, focusing on the work of the LDDC during the 80s and 90s, and briefly look at some themes of postmodern urbanism as they affect architecture. The paper presents a number of examples of Dockland's housing from this period, and uses these to illustrate how the thinking of significant postwar modernist architects and planners involved in the development is reconciled with the LDDC's Thatcherite revolution. It will suggest that the seeds of the LDDC's developer-led programme were sown during the ostensibly egalitarian modernist postwar period, and that far from being a deviation of intention, what Docklands shows is the implementation of a genuinely postmodern social, formal and aesthetic urban vision.

SLIDE 2

The docklands are a 2200 hectare, 8 ½ square mile area of east London along the north and south banks of the Thames which had developed as the trading centre of the British Empire into a vast maze of sprawling docks throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The changing social mood during the 1970s to 90s was mirrored in architectural production with a shift from centralised systems of housing provision, often producing housing of an explicitly modernist character, to market-led provision, often characterised by historicist typologies and aesthetics. This shift, as encountered so vividly in London's Docklands, was not always very well received. To quote Stephanie Williams' guide to the area: 'London's Docklands contains one of the worst collections of late 20th century building to be seen anywhere in the world.'¹ But this isn't true; rather the categories used for analysis are deficient.

Prehistory

SLIDE 3

The docklands area began life in 1802 with the opening of the West India Docks, expanding bit-by-bit until 1926 with the Quebec docks. Docks tended to be named after the destination/ source of the shipping that moored and discharged its cargo there. Brian Edwards suggest that the Docklands were less an enterprise in planning, so much as they were one of infrastructure provision forming 'an effective working landscape' driven by the market.

SLIDE 4

The docklands were consolidated under the Port of London Authority (PLA) in 1908 but in the mid-C20 increasingly fell into disuse. The PLA began to infill the underused docks, selling the land commercially in a less than buoyant market - much of the land was passed into the hands of low-value industries, embedding the decline of the urban environment. Surrey Quays alone lost over 600 hectares of dock.

5 In the wake of the Rochdale Report in 1961 which had identified Britain's transport infrastructure as being unfit for mission, various plans were proposed by both labour and conservative authorities over the following nearly two decades, **6** with a focus incremental renewal through the location of demographically relevant industry and workers housing in the area, as well as lots of leisure space

¹ (Williams, Stephanie. Docklands, ADT Architecture Guide. London: Architecture Design and Technology Press, 1990, p.1.

via public-private partnerships. A development corporation was seen as best suited for the role of organising this. ⁷ The Labour government rejected this, preferring to use existing local authorities in consultation with the public. Ideas were had, including competitions for vast areas of renewal, such as in Southwark where proposals for an early Eden Project and a ⁸ gargantuan Asda were put out for public consideration. So nothing was done.

10 What was built by the GLC in London during this period does, however, perhaps indicates what might have been: townish reserve and small-scale, bleak and suburbanite pastiche. **11** There is, perhaps, a hint of Colin Rowe. Certainly, later critiques of the LDDC's foregrounding of popular taste is already apparent in the work of the Labour-controlled GLC.

Urban Development Corporations (UDC) were established by the Conservatives on their election in 1979, with powers superseding those of the elected borough councils: ~~the power of 'land assembly and disposal' and planning control powers~~ and were accountable to a panel of experts assembled by the Secretary of State, and not the electorate.² The London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) was set-up in July 1981, funded by government grants and by the sale of land to developers. It did not answer to the electorate, could offer financial incentives to developers and was not burdened with the usual controls of the planning process.

Slide 11 Its method of 'attracting private sector activity through the stimulation of the market in land and property' generated significant discontent, and it was argued that it marginalised the existing working class population, replacing it with a more affluent one.

City living

Slide 12 The strategic approach adopted by the LDDC differed from that of the GLC and the concerned borough councils in a more fundamental and postmodern way, though. In place of the rhetoric of consultation and public discussion, the LDDC commissioned planning consultants such as Cullen & Price to concoct thematic proposals with the apparent confidence that they could and would be implemented if the LDDC chose to do so, regardless of opposition at borough or community level. Ted Hollamby, the LDDC's first director of architecture and planning, spoke of the 'great new enterprise [...] of a nature which had never been undertaken before ... we were escaping from the planning bureaucracy of the long periods that would elapse between the policies, plans and then carrying out; all had to be done at once.'³ **SLIDE 13** It may seem strange that the architect of Thamesmead, a designer influenced by the progressive modernism of Mary Medd, Corbusier, Cedric Price and Aalto and the MARS Group, should embrace the neoliberalism of the Thatcherite revolution. However, the architectural implications in Hollamby's discourse on his work, rather than the political, clearly values the spatial and aesthetic idea of architecture very highly. However, he was also sensitive to what he saw as the fascistic tendency in high modernist planning, contrasting the ability of modernism to produce excellent one-off houses with its failure to account for the social reality, the emotive content, of mass housing schemes and their apparent desire to reduce people to the status of 'ants'.⁴ What he wanted, instead, was to replicate the 'creative and enjoyable muddle' of historic towns, where great cathedrals sit amidst a chronology of housing from the succeeding centuries: 'ordered, and yet grown',⁵ as he put it.

² Brownill, S., and G. O'Hara. "From Planning to Opportunism? Re-Examining the Creation of the London Docklands Development Corporation." *Planning Perspectives* 30, no. 4 (2015): 537–70.

³ Hollamby, Edward. (13 of 17). National Life Story Collection: Architects' Lives. <https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Architects-Lives/021M-C0467X0022XX-1300V0> at 2mins.

⁴ Ibid. Transcript. p.81. <https://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/021T-C0467X0022XX-0000A0.pdf>

⁵ Ibid. p.82.

The logic of the LDDC's approach can be read via this idea, operating at both large and small scales, from the initial statement of intent, to the competition plans they ran for later sites. Contrary to the vast scale of previous planning exercises, theirs was a granular approach based on fluctuating market capacity, both of the producer and the consumer - which saw the development of Docklands as an organic, imminent process rather than a planned future vision. Somewhat counter-intuitively perhaps, this seems to have resulted in an approach which favoured conservation, and a general mood of low-key vernacular chic aesthetics, similar to the work of the GLC, *tensioned* by scattered postmodern set-pieces, but with a consistent urbanistic tenor. **SLIDE 14** The theorist architect Oswald Ungers had proposed this in his 1977 book *Berlin: A Green Archipelago* as an approach to the "shrinking city", but in London conversely used for growth. **SLIDE 15** The overall tone promoted by the LDDC is nearly always resolutely towards maintaining the aesthetic of a Victorian industrial hinterland, replete with narrow, cavernous streets and wharf-inspired buildings, in so doing projecting visions of community and energy, of the buzz of the city. This can be seen clearly at Trafalgar Court, Wapping Wall by Shepherd Epstein Hunter in 1985-7. Here a corner site, poised on the Thames bank as Wapping Wall turns north towards Shadwell Outer Lock, forms an angular crescent that embraces a small semi-public space between the building and the river edge. The street façade is used to reaffirm the building line, articulated into a single plane of saw-tooth gable-ends variously 15-20 metres high, punctuated by small arched windows to the street rising slightly towards the centre into a memorial, as it were, of factory frontages. To the river elevation, having organised the plan so that bedrooms and dining quarters all take advantage of the view, the architects opened up the façade, with big windows and red-painted metal balconies giving a reformed industrial effect.

Street Life

In embracing historical motifs, however, Trafalgar Court doesn't only satisfy the consuming resident; the urban effect is evidently an attempt to re-generate an image of the intricate social life of yesteryear, with its stories of narrow, bustling streets, lightermen and matchgirls, of intrigue and romance (if not explicitly of deprivation and violence), that characterised the old docks, for the benefit of the public at large. **16** Corrigan, Soundy and Ki-lai-diti's Elephant Lane scheme in Surrey Quays (1983) signals this, with its intricate layout replicating the intricate fabric of the old city, and the façade design treatment suggesting an attempt to produce buildings that would stimulate reciprocity with the street; one can happily almost imagine fish wives slopping-out onto pearly pick-pockets. Other schemes engage with this apparent need to memorialise the aesthetic of London's heritage: **17** an Ritchie Architect's Roy Square, Narrow Street, Limehouse (1987-9) adopts the aesthetic and form of both Georgian townhouses to the principal streets, and industrial hinterlands, whilst also forming a courtyard that hints from the street at the expensive serenity of west London's shared back gardens as well as recalling the 'courtyards in Berlin's 1984 IBA. **18** Finland Quay in Rotherhithe by Richard Reid Architects (1988) likewise employs aspects of the Georgian townhouse aesthetic in the production of blocks of flats, subverted with typical pomo tics, but in this case does so on the quayside, therefore absolutely necessitating the adoption wharfist odds and ends. **19** Jeremy Dixon's Compass Point, Isle of Dogs for the LDDC (1988) both adopts the terraced architecture of yesterday's urban poor (for today's urban quite poor - the LDDC set the unit sale price of the development at £30-40,000 – about 2.5 - 3 times the average annual salary, ABOUT 4 times the average manual labourer), recalling Roupell Street in Waterloo synthesized with the money of the Georgian square and the semi-detached Victorian villas of Islington. In so doing, another critical aspect of postmodern culture, the emphasis on memory, both collective and personal, is recalled, perhaps in answer to accusations of negation and alienation felt within

modernity.⁶ The memorialisation of everyday life towards its consumption⁷ acts in this context as structuring logic, a common language for contemporary pluralised, hybrid society. New architecture, even the highly designed parodic stuff of CZWG, can be seen to adopt this memory-culture as the starting point for its exploration. Here is, then

Water Life

These projects thus reveal postmodernity's re-interpretation of urban waterways as a framework for leisure, rather than labour. Hitherto an aspect of industrial practices, filled with the negative externalities of noise, dirt, stench and working class people, the post-industrial, leisured paradigm demanded a reappraisal of what urban waterways were for. In London, through the approach of the LDDC, the East End's Thames (still the same large, fast, turgid river) was retranslated as a positive consumable. **20** Developments such as that at Shadwell Basin, Wapping by MacCormac Jamieson Pritchard (1986-88) represent a remarkable shift in the way waterways could be approached as a setting for domestic life. Rid of its historical associations with poverty and disease, it was successfully reinterpreted as the kind of place the right kind of people would want to live beside, an agenda which became the organising logic of both urban and architectural design. **21** These both sought to activate the potential of the postindustrial landscape, cleaning it out of much of the redundant detritus, but not all, leaving behind a little of the fabric of the past, enough to lend it all a frisson of history and memory, mixed-up with a social philosophy of cultural consumption. **22** Shephard Epstein Hunter's Norway Dock embodies this perfectly, conveying something of the feel of St Saviour's Dock coupling with the coastal vernacular of south east Asia; a built version of that Eighties staple, the prawn cocktail. **23** Even hefty replication, as at Prospect Wharf was pitched on its proximity to the newly re-born east end Thames.

Pepper potting

24 In this framework the stand-out (and outstanding!) work of architects like CZWG, Ian Ritchie and MJP can best be understood as functioning like leaven in the dough - by sprinkling individual set-pieces throughout the urban fabric, the objective of the LDDC's approach can be more clearly comprehended; and follows quite noticeably Townscape-like principles of 'character and "significant differentiation"' ⁸ characteristic of Gordon Cullen's postmodern urban design philosophy. Unable to address the whole vast area within the short period of its life (the LDDC was beginning to be wound up by 1994⁹) projects like The Circle by CZWG (1987-90), Roy Square by Ritchie or **25** Sherwood Gardens, on the Isle of Dogs by Barnard Urquhart Jarvis for the LDDC (1987-92) can be seen to have been attempts to activate the natural, organic processes of urban development, much as the Georgian square of central London had functioned to activate the slow spread of London away from the river in the eighteenth century. By placing large and variously grandiose schemes on significant sites, or by making significant sites by placing grandiose schemes on them, and perhaps more significantly, by activating architectural responses that would attract a critical mass of residents, the effect can be seen to have created an urban built culture with an identity. Despite the hybridity and eclecticism available to the postmodern architect, a largely consistent visual culture emerged; renewed Docklands actually developed with a remarkably homogenous urban and aesthetic tone. **26** Even where adventurousness was the name of the game, such as at Kjaer & Richter's Greenland

⁶ Macdonald, Sharon. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. London & New York: Routledge, 2013; p.3.

⁷ *ibid*; p.109.

⁸ Whistler, William M and David Reed. "Townscape as a Philosophy of Urban Design." In *Urban Design Quarterly*. Issue 52. October 1994; 18. ISBN: 0266 6480

⁹ Florio, Simona., and Sue. Brownhill. "Whatever Happened to Criticism? Interpreting the London Docklands Development Corporation Obituary." *City* 4, no. 1 (2000): p.53.

Passage, Surrey Quays (1989), **27** the trajectory seems to be towards the normative rather than the extreme, towards the centre not the cutting edge, towards something that would sit squarely within the accepted canon of London's historical vernacular.

28 This is well illustrated in the self-build scheme at Maconochie's Wharf, Isle of Dogs (1989) where the architects Stout and Litchfield produced a muted scheme which nonetheless, like its more esoteric and academic neighbours, adopted a language reminiscent of London's worker's housing; **29** likewise Thomas Moore Court in Wapping by Boyer Design Group (1989), this time for commercial sale for Heron Homes, which modestly embraces postmodern design ideas by refracting the tone and aesthetic of an industrial heritage through a prism of suburban ordinariness.

Stability/ instability

Here, I think, we see another of the principal features of urban renewal in Docklands of this period. Confronted by a climate of social, cultural and economic instability, Docklands represented an opportunity to devise a new language of urban housing that accepted the vagaries of the market whilst also allowing for the replication of the social fabric common to the suburbs, stitched into new hybrid demographic forms emerging in the city. The presence of the New Town planner Wyndham Thomas on the board of the LDDC, makes sense here, his objective of 'necessary internal redistribution of population and employment' by peripheralization of inner urban populations and labour manifestly at the heart of the LDDC idea. Given all this tumult, it is perhaps inevitable that design looked to the past which, in contrast, must have seemed pleasingly stable and discrete. In addition, historicism had also proven itself capable of forging modern community, as the sprawling suburbs attested.

30 But it is also noteworthy that even in its suburbanite retrospection Docklands' ordinary architecture was quite so cutting edge; the semi-suburb of Beckton, at the easternmost limit of the Docklands renewal zone, illustrates this well. Having undergone numerous strategic proposals, the eventual built form accepts the stated logic of housing in the area and adopts a resolutely suburban style, which gives, according to Brian Edwards, 'the impression of a garden suburb built in the inner city.'¹⁰ **30b** There is something of Mary Medd here, too. **31** The setting as a whole clearly attempts to establish something of a new hybrid urban-suburban language, adopting a sort-of townish (and not city-like) intricacy and grain but with a scale and aesthetic that in places clearly promotes a civic monumentality, albeit a rather self-conscious one.

Framework urbanism

32 The LDDC's strategic approach to the Docklands, which maintained much of the remaining industrial port infrastructure but only for reuse as leisure commodities, 'gave over' much of the rest of the land to housing and urban-domestic culture. It was, therefore, more focused on enticing residents than were previous approaches, which continued to hold a candle for a return to the business of the industrial past, and the lifestyles and demographics it supported. The LDDC can therefore be seen to have been ahead of the curve (although it may be suggested that its actions in part precipitated the changes it foresaw), identifying the actual nature of postmodern urban life, with its emphasis on the subjective and a belief in the constructed nature of human knowledge, society and personhood. **33** For the urban realm, this meant generating a loose framework rather than a precise masterplan into which new plural populations could situate themselves. The use of

¹⁰ Edwards, Brian. *London Docklands: Urban Design in an Age of Deregulation*. Oxford: Butterworth Architecture, 1992; p.130.

conservationist and historically-inspired architecture and urban form, synthesising Disneyfied, kitsch images of the past with the fearlessly anodyne aesthetics of suburbia can perhaps in this respect be seen to have been an attempt to make a statement of mild meaning to all, and therefore no absolute statement at all, but rather to provide the blank canvas of a common mass cultural heritage¹¹ onto which the global consumer-citizen could paint their own image of the good life. As such, the material stuff of the LDDC's engagement with Docklands can perhaps be viewed as a sort-of postmodern version of the *tabula rasa* approach of high modernism, embodying far more readily the complexity of postmodern urban life as 'the art of the ensemble' to use Cullen again, 'an intuitive application by a designer of a belief in how people operate in a city.'¹²

34 Equally, however, it could be argued that Docklands *needed* to be theme park-like because that was how a postindustrial society was going to engage with it, through a process of 'past presencing',¹³ towards a 'memoryland', to use Sharon Macdonald. The everyday lives of ordinary people were thus translated through both conservation and replication in new buildings into aesthetic things, delineated, objectified and re-packaged as consumables.¹⁴

35 In this respect accusations as to the inadequacy of the LDDC in Docklands somewhat misses the point. David Harvey almost gets there, I think, when he states that 'difficulty with so-called 'high modernism' and urbanization was not [...] its 'totalising' vision, but its persistent habit of privileging things and spatial forms'.¹⁵ Instead, Harvey suggests that the 'antidote is [...] to return to the level of social processes as being fundamental to the construction'¹⁶ of the city.

It is my contention that this is what Docklands in fact more clearly describes, an environment that has, perhaps, left behind the outward trappings of the social conscience of the postwar years in favour of the spatial articulation of individualized desire. As such, what the LDDC produce at Docklands is prophetic, articulating city space, but only just enough to beget the consumer population it desired.

¹¹ Macdonald, Sharon. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. London & New York: Routledge, 2013; p.35.

¹² Whistler, William M and David Reed. "Townscape as a Philosophy of Urban Design." In *Urban Design Quarterly*. Issue 52. October 1994; 16. ISBN: 0266 6480

¹³ Macdonald, Sharon. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. London & New York: Routledge, 2013; p.12-13.

¹⁴ What David Featherstone terms the 'aestheticisation of everyday life'. Featherstone, David. "City Cultures and Post-Modern Lifestyles." In *Post-Fordism: A Reader* edited by A. Amin. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2008; 404.

¹⁵ David Harvey, "Cities or urbanization?," *City* 1: 1-2 (1996), 46.

¹⁶ Ibid.