Planning & Communication in London

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The aim of this short paper is to be informative to an international fraternity of colleagues and to offer some reflections on the problems we Londoners confront — and on some very difficult challenges which lie just in front of us.

Communication is defined widely here to include the ways in which people obtain information and ideas about the city, its past & future, the interchanges between people & various levels of the state governing the city & between all of them and the corporate and other private interests involved.

The paper outline some key **themes** in the English experience and then recounts the experiences of Londoners in recent decades. The main themes are:

(i)   juridical — matters of rights and duties;
(ii)   economic — the structure of costs facing those seeking to access information and decision procedures
(iii)   cultural and social — the ways in which access to (and influence over) public planning is mediated by the multiple cultures, class stratifications, languages, institutions and other practices of the civil society.
(iv)   the media — the technical, linguistic and design features of the various media (plans, meetings, print, TV, internet and so on) used in communication.

These themes overlap and interact with changing structure and practices of national and local government and urban policy, as we shall see.

Juridical Issues

The UK has no written constitution, the sovereignty of the parliament is formally absolute so it can, for example, create or extinguish 'rights' and entire local governments at will, subject only to EU law. The parliament is almost always under the strong control of the ruling political party.

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[1] I am very grateful to Antonia Layard for comments on juridical issues - but the responsibility for the text is mine, not hers.

There is no clear concept of 'citizenship': we are all 'subjects of the queen' and the only 'citizenship' we have is that of the EU — so far hardly tested. Most of our ethnic minority populations, however, have voting rights for local — and many for national — elections. The UK is resolutely outside the Schengen Agreement and border-controls are tough against migration and against refugees but those who do enter and stay can obtain British nationality after some years if they can demonstrate a degree of assimilation and a clean police record. The significance of this is that most urban residents have full political rights in (at least local) government — through actual participation is very variable and often very low.

The powers (indeed the very existence) of forms of government at lower levels is determined by the UK parliament: it was able to abolish metropolitan councils in 1996, to create assembles for Scotland and Wales this year and further major changes for London and other regions are taking place now. The local governments which we have are, however, much less powerful and autonomous than their formal constitutions would suggest because the central government controls their fiscal position very rigidly and specifies their policies and practices to a high degree. Councils are subject to a flood of 'advice' and 'guidance' from the centre on everything from the school curriculum to cycling, from housing policy to the protection of trees. If they ignore this advice their decisions can be overturned or their resources reduced.

There is no Freedom of Information Act comparable to the USA's and — apart from a narrow group of documents like the minutes of local government committees — public access to the deliberation of public bodies and politicians is uncertain, contentious and variable.

Many decision-making processes which have direct impacts on private (individual and corporate) interests are subject to objection and appeal procedures. Historically[2] these procedures derive from, and protect, the land and real estate interests of property-owners and they therefore apply to actions involving expropriation of land by the state or by private bodies and to major transport and civil engineering projects. Other class or group interests, and other types of state policy and action are **not** similarly protected by appeal and inquiry procedures (except that individuals can appeal against their treatment in certain social-welfare, education, tax and other relations with the state).

Town and Country Planning is a unique field in that extensive rights and obligations for 'public participation' have been grafted on to the legal system since 1968. These procedures relate both to the making of plans and to the detailed control of development permits ('development control'). They are now supplemented by some requirements under the EU environmental directive. Planning authorities have to provide opportunities for consideration, objection and public hearings ('inquiries')

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[2] (Offer 1981; McMahon 1985).

at various stages in the preparation and adoption of development plans. Local authorities vary a lot in whether they maximise or minimise the effective public participation through these channels. There are further requirements that individual development proposals should be advertised, objections can be made and must be taken in to account by the planning authority when it decides. These decisions are based only partly on 'conformity' with the development plan (though rather more so since a law of 1991), instead they should be based on 'all material considerations' — a concept so imprecise that a lot of work is generated for lawyers.

Lawyers are also heavily involved in the various public inquiry procedures which arise routinely in the preparation of plans, where a developer appeals against a local authority decision or in the few controversial cases where the central government minister (the 'Secretary of State') 'calls in' an application for his own direct decision. It is notable that there is right of appeal against refusal of development permission but no right of appeal for injured parties against the granting of permission.

In summary I would say that citizens of the UK and thus of London have quite good voting rights, though these may not be worth much[3] and some rights to defend their property interests against state action. The town planning system is important because it embodies further rights to direct democratic engagement alongside the indirect right (to vote for representatives).

The economics of communication

There is always a tendency for economic conditions to constrain formal rights and a number of important points need to be made here.

The commodification of information has spread like a cancer since the 1970s and takes many forms. Universities charge students between £1,000 and £10,000 per year depending on the level, the subject and the student's national origins. The government mapping and statistical services charge high prices for their 'products'. Real estate data is gathered by the squirrels of the private sector (mostly chartered surveyors) and it becomes part of the their capital — at the expense of market efficiency. We could multiply the examples. The development of the internet has been, on the one hand, aided by the strong computer culture initiated by the BBC 20 years ago but also inhibited by the lack of un-metered telephone calls (crucial to the US leadership in this field) and by the extremely short-sighted attitudes of successive governments to the need for high bandwidth cabling to homes and schools. In London the research and intelligence unit of the former GLC became a quasi-autonomous body when the GLC was abolished in 1986 and has since supported itself from its income. Thus it charges of its services in disseminating statistical data and in this way contributes to the very poor dissemination of information in the city.

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[3] The last leader of the GLC chose carefully in titling his autobiography: *If voting changed anything they'd abolish it*, (Livingstone 1987)

An equally important economic dimension relates to the 'public participation' mechanisms described above. To participate is costly. For citizens to make effective representations about the management or planning of their areas requires time and money. To sustain these positions through the formal procedures — especially the public inquiries — costs even more. The recent record is the inquiry into the proposed construction of Terminal 5 at Heathrow Airport which has just closed after 5 years, 12 days of hearings with dozens of advocates and experts involved every day. Every one of the 33 London Boroughs has approved a Unitary Development Plan (and will produce a revision within 5 years[4]), with public inquiries which have lasted from a few days to a few months (Parkes, Mythen et al. 1999). Public Inquires into individual development proposals number tens of thousands in the UK each year, thousands in London, with a duration ranging from a few hours to many weeks. Meetings are almost always held during the working day. Citizens and citizen groups need massive resources of time, technical knowledge and skill (or money) to sustain their positions in these conditions.

The last few years have seen an interesting paradox: in a partial retreat from the extremes of Thatcherist de-regulation, a new Act of 1991 insisted that approved development plans would become the main determinant of whether planning permission would be granted on individual projects. Excellent. But it meant that those with land and property interests began to take the formulation of plans very seriously, sending their experts and lawyers to the development plan inquiries to protect their interests in detail. This has had the paradoxical effect of increasing the duration and cost of the inquiries for everyone — including citizen groups.

The significance of all this is that rights may exist but it is costly to exercise them. And in a society with unequal and polarising income and wealth this means that rights are mainly for the rich.

No legal aid is available to fight planning cases. A few lawyers offer their services free or cheaply[5]. In London we also have the London Planning Aid Service paid for by the Royal Town Planning Institute which organises professional planners and students to offer voluntary expertise. The Royal Institute of British Architects also has a 'community architecture' section which tries to support grassroots initiatives. Some universities have contributed through the work of individual staff or students but we have no sign of any corporate commitment of Universities to their localities — as found in some north American cities (Bender 1998) or in Thessaloniki (Kotsakis 1995) and elsewhere (van der Wusten 1998) All of these initiatives are significant but they only scratch the surface of the economic

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[4] The exception is Camden which has still to complete its first adoption.
[5] David Harter is an example of a lawyer who has done this - in his support for the King's Cross Railways Lands Group and related bodies. Jeffrey Jowell is an example of a barrister (advocate) who has also assisted. Many radical lawyers do this kind of work on a modest scale. The Environmental Law Foundation assists with environmental cases.

problem. Control of data, formalised understanding and management of urban processes lies essentially with capital and others have to buy their way in.

Cultural and social factors

The Society is characterised by important cultural features affecting political life and by complex ethnic and other and other differences and inequalities.

The role of political parties in the life of the country has weakened in recent decades with party memberships falling and with policy increasingly being imposed by the leadership rather than coming up through internal party democracy. The Conservative Party has moved back towards the centre since Mrs Thatcher's displacement in 1991 but retains enough right-wing support effectively to prevent the emergence of explicit fascist groups (notwithstanding some extreme attitudes in part of the population). The Labour Party has been moved a long way to the right by the Blair leadership but — so far — has retained most of the voting support of the left (or at least their abstention) and red/green parties have yet to emerge significantly. A Liberal Democratic party also exists — traditionally a party of the centre, but now distinctly more radical than Labour on international, human rights and fiscal issues — so a potential threat to Labour in the long run.

Popular participation in local representative politics remains weak in most areas and party management has meant that, for most Labour Party members, membership consists of paying your direct debit and receiving mail shots from Tony Blair in exchange.

The UK is known, however, for its highly developed complex of informal resident, tenant, issue-based and other campaigning groups which are highly active in most localities. It has been argued that active members of such groups often out-number those voting in local elections (Parkes 1995) and it is these groups which are most active in local planning debates and formal public participation processes, as well as in pressuring local elected representatives.

This system has its strengths and certainly it represents a strong body or organised local knowledge, commitment and work. But it is criticised for bypassing and thus further weakening formal representative democracy, giving disproportionate influence to knowledgeable, rich and leisured strata and for tending to local parochialism and nimbyism.

There is probably great variation in the degree to which both the formal and the informal politics of British planning represent ethnic and other segments of the society. The cultural and ethnic picture is complex. White people, mostly of UK origin, remain dominant at 94% of the BG population (77% in London). Of the 1.5 million non-white people estimated to live among London's total of 7 million, about 38% are black

and 37% from south Asia (ONS 1997). Most parts of the world seem to be represented and there are very many mixed-ethnicity individuals.

Certain communities are geographically concentrated though, perhaps, a mix of economic or religious interdependence (Cypriots, orthodox Jews and some Pakistanis).[6] Others tend to be clustered where the poorest housing has been available and this is often reinforced by exclusion mechanisms in housing elsewhere (Bengalis in Somers Town, Tower Hamlets and Newham, some Afro-Caribbean people in numerous estates and other clusters around the city). Rarely, however, does any group dominate its locality on the scale found in US cities and a tolerant multiculturalism is still the main experience of most Londoners, I suspect, even though suspicion, mistrust, fear and overt racism remain very prevalent and the schools are often not resourced to cope.

The significance of all this is that effective access to communication about planning and urban issues and decisions are subject to cultural and linguistic barriers which probably tend to reinforce the economic ones to a great extent. In terms of formal communication many agencies of central and local government have, over the last 10-20 years, developed some adaptation to the linguistic problem and translations of welfare forms, information leaflets and other documents are sometimes produced in the languages spoken locally — notably Gujerati, Chinese, Turkish, Urdu, Greek. It is rare, however, for planning documents to be translated except in very brief form, or for interpreters to be available in planning meetings. The more progressive local authorities do now provide signing to help deaf people in some meeting and make allowance for other disabilities.

Media and their use

At last I come to the media used in communicating planning: the words, the plans, the newspapers and TV the internet.

The words are of course a major story in themselves and there is no room to tell it here. Briefly one could say that the rather technocratic and functionalist language of the 70s gave way to a rather crude and raw neo-liberal language of *market demand, flexibility and individual freedom* in the 80s. The key government policy document was 'Lifting the Burden' (of state regulation) and planning was to be based on the principle of 'the market knows best'. The 1990s has been characterised by some very imprecise dominant words, ideal cover for the fragile consensus-building of the period: *sustainability*, *partnership* and (a 1980s word which lives on) *regeneration*. Some very large cracks can be papered over with such elastic words — as we shall see.

Probably the central medium for planning is the Plan. In Britain — as is well known and well-documented (Rydin 1998) — the Development Plan is a distinctive thing. It is essentially a long text. The text often begins by

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[6] Se the chapter by Malcolm Cross on ethnic minorities in Thornley (Thornley 1992).

setting out some goals or aims of the planning authority, or in modern parlance a *vision*, from which the details of the plan are purported to flow. There is often very little meaning because the aims need to be both consistent with government 'advice' and reflecting the priorities of the local authority. But nuances are detectable by the expert reader amongst the apple pie, motherhood (and sustainability).

The substance of the plan is a long narrative, arranged under functional headings like housing, environment, transport, shopping, each leading to a series of policies. These are the core of the Plan and the focus of all the argument since it is these which will influence development control. They tend to express the desired direction of change (or resistance to change) with little quantification or precision. Much of the debate in public inquiries is over the degree of precision.

Some of these policies apply to the entire area of the plan while others apply to specific places or designated zones or districts. The only significant graphic is a key diagram, coloured on a scale map-base, which shows which policies apply to which area. There is no attempt at visualisation of the effects of proposed changes nor at pleasing or motivating the reader. The graphic design is always dull and the crucial policies are the least appealing part, always being set in capital letters. As exercises in communication they are very poor — compared with those of the 1940s (Abercrombie etc), the New Town plans of the 1970s or the best European plans of today. They are expensive to buy (costing between £12 and about £80) and I suspect are rarely read except professionally.

The significant paper communication is in newspapers — for which planning stories are a significant source of news and features. Britain has a rich mosaic of local weekly newspapers and some daily ones in urban areas. These, and local radio and TV station carry frequent stories on transport issues, parking, shopping policy, controversies about conservation of heritage or countryside and architectural styles. It is rarely sophisticated or profound journalism but it is plentiful and controversial. Editors seem to think we like reading about threats to our environment, to our house prices, to our freedom to drive and park. Crime and the fear of crime, especially in poor housing areas, gets coverage too. Perhaps the editors are right.

Urban problems can make good television and most of the major controversies at regional or national level are covered by documentaries as well as news reports. The high standards of British public service broadcasting and of some commercial commissioning editors and independent producers have been invaluable in this — though there are strong pressures for these standards to fall and in no sense is there any democratic access to the production of TV. The internet is not (yet) much used. Most local authorities have web sites, either for marketing and

public relations or as directories of services and responsibilities[7]. But I have not yet seen plans disseminated on the web, much less the web used interactively as a forum for debate. So far the web is used mainly by campaign and resident groups to link their activities and to spread their messages[8].

There are some interesting experiments form universities in virtual reality or map-based representations but I have yet to see applications as advanced as those reported by Aurigi for Amsterdam[9].

Two further dimensions of the media used in planning discussion must be added. First is the growing importance of marketing — of cities themselves and of developments, projects and localities within the city. This is the work of the plethora of real estate companies, private promotional bodies and semi-state quangos which have come to dominate urban development since 1980. These agencies use carefully targeted media ranging from editorial space in magazines and TV for general image-marketing to lavish brochures mailed to potential customers worldwide. The prevailing orthodoxy that prosperity of the country depends upon attracting international footloose investment has spurred heavy public and private spending of this sort. This brings us to the importance of architects and their designs as a case both of the medium and the message. We have a distinct culture here with architects playing an increasingly cosmetic role (Ive 1995). In the intense struggles to develop and to capture value in the city it is the architects who are engaged both to cement the real estate projects into tangible form and to produce images while win — both in the struggle for permission and in the struggle for investors and occupiers. There are modern, post-modern and retro skills available, all skilled in the production of images and communication.

London: a story

These themes can be seen in the unfolding story of London planning in the last 20 years. The 1980s were characterised by highly conflictual planning discussions. The Thatcher government came to power in 1979 in a context of recession and committed to radical neo-liberal reforms and a project to weaken and circumvent the powers of elected local government — especially in London.

In the early 80s we saw the first of the marketing communications of the London Docklands Development Corporation — set up to take over the land, planning powers and development rights of public and private agencies in the port. The LDDC from the outset spent heavily on marketing, aiming to attract investors and residents to waterside environments, converted warehouses and new houses and open spaces

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[7] A good example is Hackney http://www.hackney.gov.uk
[8] The Land is Ours is a good example, with links to many others
http://www.oneworld.org/tlio/
[9] http://www.dds.nl. (Aurigi and Graham 2000).

ready for development. The message to developers emphasised the benefits of minimal planning, proximity to the City and the new telecommunications infrastructure. The message selling the housing tended to emphasise planning — in the sense of urban landscape design frameworks exploiting (or in the Surrey Docks re-inventing) the water + history combination (Malone 1996).

The LDDC and the simultaneous weakening of planning in the rest of London met a strong response from the GLC (Greater London Council, the government for most of the core metropolis inside the green belt). The GLC both articulated resistance and initiated its own counter strategies. There was a strong grass-roots orientation to their 'popular planning' which generated a mass of manifestos, technical documents, multi-language publications and plentiful press coverage. Most remarkable perhaps were the meetings: the GLC would frequently hold consultations and debates with citizens groups, women's organisations, ethnic minority and trade union groups in the heavy oak-panelled splendours of the Edwardian County Hall. The Chambers and anterooms would fill with the poor, with militants, with black and Asian people — and always with crèches for children, translators and signers for the deaf. This 'Winter Palace' atmosphere, passionate but also often humorous, enraged the right and was certainly part of a powerful communication.

The main material actions of the GLC, before it was abolished in 1986, were
(i)   a major reduction in public transport prices which began to reverse the switch to cars before it was ruled improper by the courts, and
(ii)   strong organisational and financial support to grassroots campaigns in the workplace and in the neighbourhoods — which had lasting effects after abolition.

These initiatives led to some important documents — the highly innovative London Economic Strategy and London Labour Plan, well researched, written and designed as highly communicative attempts to show that there were alternatives to Thatcher's thinking (GLC 1985; Greater London Council 1985) . Also of great importance was the Community Areas Strategy and related proposed modifications to the Greater London Development Plan (Greater London Council 1985). These were the product of the work with local groups in the areas around the centre, most vulnerable to CBD expansion: Coin Street, Kings Cross, Paddington, Spitalfields and so on. All these documents were supremely well produced and very widely distributed — cheaply or free.

It will probably be said by future historians that the GLC's communication strategy and its intense interaction with parts of the society normally outside politics had a lasting effect on planning and urban affairs, at least through the rest of the decade.

In the period from 1986 the vacuum of London planning generated a bizarre proliferation of new organisations to take over its functions from

fire fighting to garbage disposal, from cultural affairs to supporting community groups (Ryser 1987). This had led to very important changes in communication. For the overseas visitor (businessman, researcher, student, study group) there was nowhere to go to be to be told about London, stand round the city model and collect brochures. For systematic data and research the vacuum became very severe. Part of the GLC's research activity became the autonomous London Research Centre & re-oriented its work to servicing the 33 boroughs who subscribed its main costs and to serve a new category of commercial users. Its dissemination work has reduced, its services were priced and even students had to pay to use the library. The economics team was disbanded and since 1986 there has been no entity working systematically on the London or regional economy.

The partial success-story of the period was LPAC, the London Planning Advisory Committee, reluctantly set up by government in 1986 to 'advise the Secretary of State' of behalf of the 33 Boroughs which now became the only planning authorities, each combining 'strategic' (!) and local functions. LPAC was widely expected to be paralysed by political disagreements among the 33, reinforced by its extreme marginalisation in Romford, and eastern working class periphery beyond the London telephone area and the tube. Somehow, however, the Borough politicians and the officials held it together and it became quite a powerful force, voicing a surprisingly critical consensus privately to government and publicly to Londoners. Its communicative influence had been out of all proportion to its time staff and to its publications (hard to get and no pleasure to read).

LPAC documents, like most official UK planning documents, are essentially text occasionally enlivened by charts and with one graphic: the London Strategic Diagram. This is a graphic of compromise (The graphic here is the LPAC 'environmental diagram'; the London stragic diagram will shortly replace it - M.E. Oct 2000). it is a sketchy diagram showing the approximate location of consensus proposals: the green belt of course, primary axes or areas for development and so on. It also embodies a fantasy, however, showing a set of shopping centres one of which is required by every Borough — normally one close to the centroid of its arbitrary territory. For fear of trespassing on the competence of Boroughs for development planning, the LPAC scheme is also unable to indicate the concrete configuration of transport lines, development zones and opportunities which could make London work much better. The diagram both reflects and reinforces the inability of this committee structure to engage politically or creatively with the spatial planning of the metropolis.

The other important planning communication is the later 80s was the community action and local movements, now operating without the GLC behind them. These groups, with their various campaigns (on housing estates, transport, defending localities form the property boom of the late 80s) were often adept at communication, capturing press and TV coverage, aided by some creative use of 'planning-for-real' and some actual alternative plans (Parkes 1991).

One outstanding case was the Coin Street project where local groups were able to take actual ownership of land in the last days of the GLC and use revenues from car parking on empty land to finance work on their alternative plan and for a significant information campaign based on the slogan 'there is another way' (Brindley, Rydin et al. 1989; Edwards 1994). No other grouping was able to capture land ownership or such a resource flow. However the Kings Cross Railway Lands Group was able to mount alternative plans, give the local politicians in Camden Council added confidence and evidence to resist giving a quick decision to developers of an office city designed by Foster Associates — and thus to delay the project until the property boom crashed. This kind of highly effective communication involved continuing negotiation and haggling among local politicians and activists, some financial support from Camden, from RIBA and local private interests and material inputs from myself and students of the UCL Bartlett School.

Many of these experiences are chronicled by Michael Parkes, the planner who has done most to give technical support in these conditions (Parkes 1995).

Starting in the late 80s and continuing into the 90s has been a further growth in communication as marketing. This activity has been fuelled by the consensus view — scarcely challenged — that the future of London depends on its success in an ill-defined global competition aimed at visitors and foreign investors (Edwards and Budd 1997). The LDDC had set the tone for this work in the early 80s but it grew and proliferated as a variety of London-wide, sub-regional and local agencies were set up to sell their territories. This was not about planning but it was about the city and its parts and sometimes architectural images and schemes have been part of the message.

Since the early 1990s we have had a re-orientation of government policy towards a regime of competition between localities for a limited fund of public money. This competition is managed by a Government Office for each region, bringing together civil servants from various ministries in an unprecedented attempt at co-ordination, sometimes compared with the office of the Prefect in France. In London we have the Government Office for London (GOL). These offices operate with all the usual secrecy of government ministries and the process of competition between localities is based on bids by locally-constituted 'partnerships' of private, public and non-profit bodies. These bodies are constituted as private companies and the significance of this for communication is that - while they perform important public policy functions - they are free to operate in the private way characteristic of other firms.

This retreat of public decision into private confidentiality has also been a feature of negotiation about development permits throughout the city. Increasingly through the 1980s and 1990s local authorities have tried to negotiate 'planning agreements' with developers alongside the grant of permission. These agreements are a matter of confidential bargaining and thus not open to public scrutiny.

In all these respects it could be said that communication about planning in London has been increasingly shrouded in privacy and confidentiality, reinforced by the economic problems of access to information. News about the city and about planning has been increasingly 'managed' by government, private and semi-private bodies.

But we now have a new prospect: from May 2000 London will have a directly-elected Mayor and (for the first time since 1986) an elected Assembly. The mayor will have the duty to prepare strategies for the economy, for the environment and for 'spatial development'. All this offers an opportunity for a remarkable new opening in democratic communication about London and its problems. In the run-up to this new system, however, the signs are that politicians and interest groups are busy

forming essentially-private agendas to put before the Mayor and that the offices of the new organisations will be staffed by the same people who did the work before. Ensuring that this new regime becomes really a democratic one, and that communication opens up, is a great challenge. The danger is that communication could be even more centrally managed.

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