

Chapter Title: London, the unique city: the establishment of the Architecture and Urbanism Unit

Chapter Author(s): Peter Bishop, Lara Kinneir and Mark Brearley

Book Title: Design for London

Book Subtitle: Experiments in urban thinking

Book Editor(s): Peter Bishop, Lesley Williams

Published by: UCL Press. (2020)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv13xps62.9>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



UCL Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Design for London*

London, the unique city: the establishment of the Architecture and Urbanism Unit

Peter Bishop, Lara Kinneir and Mark Brearley

This chapter examines the circumstances that led to the re-establishment of London government in 2000 and the formation of the Architecture and Urbanism Unit (A+UU) by the mayor, Ken Livingstone, and his architecture and urbanism advisor, Richard Rogers. It reviews the work and methodologies of the A+UU, which provided an important platform for the later establishment of Design for London (DfL).

Context: London, the unique city

Although London shares many of the characteristics of other European cities – neighbourhoods, parks, civic buildings and the street (as both public space and public thoroughfare) – it has some important differences. It is generally less compact and therefore less ‘urban’ than many European cities. It has always been a city focused on trade and commerce and therefore one open to new ideas and people – cosmopolitan and mercantile. London has also been fortunate throughout most of its history. It was able to dismantle its city walls much earlier than other European cities and thus could expand outwards, ‘capturing’ existing settlements. This has given it a different, less dense urban morphology and considerable physical diversity between its neighbourhoods.

Power in London has never been concentrated into the hands of an individual or small ruling clique, but has instead been dispersed and shared between corporations, businesses and individuals. The early

introduction of freeholds produced a class of landowners and a model of growth and development that was reliant on private capital. The separation of government (Westminster) from commerce and trade (the City) ensured that no single all-powerful individual was able to stamp their image on the city through personal *grands projets*. When London started its first major outwards expansion at the beginning of the eighteenth century, development was largely financed by private landowners. This created not only the ‘great estates’ that still exist today, but also a pattern of fragmented development and fine-grained urban form that has been able to adapt and renew itself while accommodating significant changes in social organisation and technology. Finally, London’s great period of expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made it both polycentric and diverse – as was so elegantly captured in the diagram in the 1943 Abercrombie Plan (Figure 1.1). Significantly, this growth largely preceded the automobile and was based on the creation of comprehensive rail and tram routes.

The growth of London to become the largest metropolis in the world challenged notions of governance and administration. The Municipal Corporation Act 1835 started to regularise the chaos of new and largely ungoverned districts; the Metropolis Management Act 1855



Figure 1.1 London, a city of neighbourhoods, by Abercrombie, 1943. Source: Patrick Abercrombie and John Forshaw, Greater London Plan, 1944.

tackled the need for coordinated investment in infrastructure; and the Local Government Act 1888 established the London County Council. Subsequent Local Government Acts, in 1894 and 1900, established a lower tier of government – the London boroughs. While this produced a local tier of democratic accountability and service delivery, it also dispersed power within London, a situation that was consolidated in 1965 when boroughs were amalgamated into larger units – the 33 boroughs that exist today. This form of administrative organisation was well suited to the conditions of the twentieth century where powerful state agencies were accepted as necessary in order to tackle issues of urban growth, urban renewal, postwar reconstruction, slum clearance, urban transportation and welfare provision.

By the beginning of the 1970s, the role of the state started to be questioned and was then severely shaken by the policies of the Thatcher governments from 1979 onwards. A weak national economy placed significant strains on public funding for transport, housing and urban renewal, and successive funding reductions weakened local authorities. Even before the 1979 election, the powerful technical departments that had driven large-scale urban restructuring were being dismantled. The end of the 1970s effectively spelt the end of the powerful and proactive public sector as the major participant in urban development.

The idea of a reduced state presence was manifest in reduced funding and powers for local government. This ushered in a period of protracted opposition to central government from a number of left-wing inner London boroughs. Central government prevailed and one of the casualties was the Greater London Council (GLC), which was abolished in 1986.¹ The abolition of the GLC meant that central government took direct control of London government, in effect depriving London of an independent voice. While often portrayed as an act of political spite, the abolition of the GLC was part of the trend of centralisation of political power into Westminster, at the expense of cities and the regions. Of direct benefit to London, however, was a change in UK regional policy. Postwar programmes had sought to direct investment away from London and the South East in favour of the depressed former industrial areas. This policy was abandoned in the 1980s in favour of allowing market forces to decide regional investment priorities. This change and the financial deregulation of the City meant that investment began to flow back into London.

For London, the 1990s was a period of transition. Stripped of its elected strategic level of government, it was administered by central government and a series of non-elected advisory bodies. Consequently,

at a time of globalisation there was no governing body to promote the interests of the city as a whole or to develop projects or strategies on the scale of Paris, New York or Berlin (where German reunification was driving major urban change). There were, however, changes taking place. First, London's population, in line with many major cities across the world, was beginning to grow again. The population of London had been in decline² since the end of the Second World War due to industrial restructuring and the impact of housing renewal programmes that had displaced populations beyond the city fringe to the New Towns and elsewhere. This decline had left large areas of land derelict, particularly in east London, and had created severe pockets of unemployment and social deprivation in many other parts of the city. The government had responded by setting up the London Docklands Development Corporation, tasked with bringing forward regeneration in the east of the city. Meanwhile, the financial deregulation (the Big Bang) of the 1980s had led to a series of new commercial developments such as Broadgate and Canary Wharf.

As London emerged from the economic slump of the early 1990s, new money was injected into the economy, much of it from overseas. At this time, a new generation of architects was emerging who had been influenced by Josef Paul Kleihues' 1987 International Building Exhibition Berlin.³ This was a seminal moment when architects and urban thinkers, including Aldo Rossi, Léon Krier and James Stirling, refashioned an urbanism based on the principles of the European city – the street, the perimeter block and the public space. This inspired architectural practice in cities like Barcelona and Paris. Cheap airfares to these and other European destinations had produced a small but influential class of 'city consumers'. Their visits to cities such as Lyon, Turin and Bilbao fuelled demands for more investment in their own cities and public spaces. The National Lottery, set up in 1994, provided new funding for heritage and 'millennium projects'. It triggered architecture-led interventions including the Tate Modern at Bankside (Herzog & de Meuron), the Great Court at the British Museum (Foster), the Millennium Bridge (Foster), the Greenwich Dome (Rogers) and the London Eye (Marks Barfield). These captured the public imagination and were undoubtedly popular. In parallel, the new confidence in the City of London stimulated a new generation of tall buildings like Foster's Swiss Re Tower. Initially derided by the Prince of Wales as 'the Gherkin', it was generally acclaimed by the public and soon became a symbol of London's new-found confidence. Slowly, London was reclaiming its urbanity, and architecture was becoming a talking point.

By the late 1990s, the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major were running out of steam and the Labour Party under Tony Blair was preparing a transformative agenda for government. This agenda was forward-looking and saw technology and design as some of the key strengths of 'Cool Britannia'.⁴ Architecture was part of this agenda. The spirit of the time was captured by the Architecture Foundation. Established in 1991 to examine contemporary issues in architectural design and theory (and with Richard Rogers, Norman Foster, James Stirling, Alan Yentob and Nick Serota on its board), it organised a series of debates, roadshows and exhibitions to stimulate public interest in architecture and urbanism. The most influential of these were monthly debates in a packed Westminster Central Hall. One of these, in 1996, debated the future governance of London. It provided the forum for the newly elected leader of the opposition, Tony Blair, to formally pledge to re-establish London government in the event of a Labour election victory.

Tony Blair won a landslide victory in May 1997, and in April 1998 Richard Rogers was asked to set up and chair the Urban Task Force to rethink urban policy. John Prescott, the deputy prime minister, set out the need for this rethinking:

Over the past few decades many of our urban areas have suffered neglect and decline with an exodus from the inner cities, driven by a lack of confidence in schools, fear of crime, an unhealthy environment, and poor housing. This is bad for our people, bad for quality of life, bad for our economy and bad for our society.⁵

The Urban Task Force brought together leading practitioners, representatives of government institutions, academia and the development sector, and gathered evidence from many experts in fields from architecture to engineering to environmental sustainability. It looked at examples of best practice in the UK, the rest of Europe and America, and from these it derived the concept of the city as a sustainable place to live, a city built on a human scale and a city built around the individual citizen. The subsequent report, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*,⁶ set out a framework for urban thinking that included concepts like the compact city, the reuse of 'brownfield land', the city based on walking and cycling and the city that recognises the importance of public spaces. It set the foundations for planning and design in London when Ken Livingstone was elected mayor in 2000. It celebrated the role of the city in human culture and marked a major shift in thinking and practice in urban policy. It led to

the production and publication of the government's *Urban White Paper* in 2000⁷ and, in 2005, to an updated report of the Urban Task Force's research, *Towards a Strong Urban Renaissance*.⁸

Mayoral government in London: in the court of the Medicis

The new Labour government held a referendum on the principle of re-establishing metropolitan government in London presided over by an elected mayor. Subsequently, the 1999 London Government Act paved the way for the establishment of the Greater London Authority (GLA). Its principal purpose was to promote the economic and social development and the environmental improvement of Greater London. Ken Livingstone, the last leader of the GLC, was elected as London's first mayor in 2000.⁹ Livingstone's agenda was both strategic and pragmatic. Despite his left-wing reputation, he recognised that London's future would depend on being a major player on the world stage and that a strong economy and inward investment were vital in order to support programmes around public transport, improved housing and environmental quality. While still an important global city, London had slipped well behind New York in terms of its economic power, cultural offer and influence. With the arrival of the new century, London looked outwards again and redefined itself as the major trading centre in the global economy.

Livingstone's advisor on planning, Nicky Gavron, fully embraced the ideas in the Urban Task Force report and was keen to incorporate these into a new London Plan. For Livingstone they resonated with his vision of a global city that could outperform New York economically, be environmentally responsible and socially equitable, and create the conditions of urban life that would attract both global investment and footloose global talent. Underpinning this vision was a city that was diverse, cosmopolitan, confident and open. In retrospect, this vision does not appear to be radical, but at the time it articulated London's role in the emerging global liberal economy in a way that had not been done before. This vision still provides the basis of London's urban policies and has survived subsequent changes in political leadership.

The ideas of the Urban Task Force were translated into planning policies through a new London Plan. These included the idea of the compact city (dense rather than sprawling), the reuse of brownfield

land (rather than building on green space) and development focused on public transport (involving restraint on private car use). Transport for London (TfL) was transformed from a highway agency into a transport authority, and budgets were redirected towards public transport, walking and cycling. Tall buildings were encouraged, partly to densify the city but also partly to symbolise London's new confidence. The regeneration of east London was prioritised (ultimately leading to the successful bid for the 2012 Olympics) and the London Development Agency (LDA) was tasked with land acquisition and decontamination. Critically development, responsibly controlled, was seen as a source of growth and future prosperity rather than a threat to communities. In parallel, programmes were established to channel funds into employment and training schemes to facilitate the wider distribution of London's new wealth.

The restoration of London government under an elected mayor produced an entirely new form of political administration – one without precedent or established practices. The mayor was supposed to exercise executive power under the scrutiny of a number of committees that theoretically could hold him to account. In practice they were weak and their role was constrained. That said, the London Government Act of 1999 had deliberately sought to limit the GLA to a strategic remit. The Blair government did not want a return to the days of the GLC where strategic control and service delivery sat alongside one another in a large and unwieldy body.

The new mayor did take over control of transport (through TfL) and economic development (through the LDA). These two bodies came with significant powers and money as well as traditions of organisational independence. London government had been re-established, but it was organised in silos and the only point of intersection was the office of the mayor. Livingstone worked through close political allies who became portfolio holders and advisors – in effect a non-elected cabinet. This *modus operandi* clearly suited Livingstone, whose skills combined strategic thinking with attention to detail and a highly developed political acumen. The GLA was young, unfettered by institutional history and in campaigning mode to wrest greater powers and money from central government. The fluidity of the structure, combined with an absence of service delivery responsibilities (apart from running TfL), was perfectly set up for an experienced political operator like Livingstone. Early in its establishment, Deputy Mayor Nicky Gavron described it enthusiastically as being 'like working in the court of the Medicis'.¹⁰

The creation of the Architecture and Urbanism Unit (A+UU)

Ken Livingstone asked Richard Rogers to investigate how London could deliver on the recommendations in the Urban Task Force report. The structure of city government in London lacked the role of a city architect, a position that many European cities had established. The role was offered to Richard Rogers on a part-time basis at a considerable salary. Rogers accepted on condition that he would be an advisor (not city architect) and that the salary would be reduced to one pound with the balance being used to build a design team to support him. This led to the creation of the Architecture and Urbanism Unit (A+UU).

The A+UU was set up within the GLA. Initially, it included a seconded member of the mayor's private office (Richard Brown) alongside Richard Rogers in his role as chief advisor to the mayor.¹¹ They reviewed the existing regeneration services within the mayor's family of organisations – the GLA, the LDA and TfL – to consider how existing resources could be restructured in light of the Urban Task Force's recommendations. This review established new connections between people and projects across the different organisations and set the foundation for collaboration on regeneration projects across the GLA. Mark Brearley, a partner at the architecture practice East, was appointed as the first head of the unit. By the end of 2002 the team employed five staff members: a unit manager from the mayor's private office, an urban design manager, a public space project manager, an architectural assistant and an administrator. Architecturally trained professionals held two of these positions.¹² The creation of the A+UU was a key step in developing new design thinking on London. Its focus on contemporary urban theory was an important innovation introduced by Rogers and his close collaborator Professor Ricky Burdett from the London School of Economics.

Although the A+UU sat alongside the GLA planning teams, its reporting lines were ambiguous. Initially, it reported to the mayor through Richard Rogers and it had no formal statutory role in London government. This was both a strength and a weakness. Without formal power or spending budgets, the team could be strategic and agile – and could think outside the constraints that often limit government employees. The success of this arrangement relied heavily on the use of 'soft power' and political influence. This works as long as the mayor is in power and is willing to support the arrangement. If the mayor or the relationship changes, then life can become uncomfortable very quickly.

This theme recurs in the next chapter concerning the A+UU's successor body Design for London (DfL).

The A+UU and its influences

The A+UU had the rare privilege of being able to fashion a new work approach that was tailored specifically to London. Its thinking was shaped by a wide range of influences that were then central to European urbanism. These included the importance of mixed-use neighbourhoods and the primary position of the street as civic space – ideas that stretched back to Jane Jacobs and the Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA Berlin), which first brought forward the concept of ‘careful urban renewal’. The concept of mixed zones is now well established in UK and European planning. Single-use zones might be efficient in terms of industrial-style economies of scale but are ill-suited to the new economy which is based on intense exchange of ideas. Here proximity and interconnectivity are the keys. The idea of an urban paradigm based on synergies and a degree of tolerated disorder sits comfortably with the concept of ‘everyday urbanism’ introduced by John Chase, Margaret Crawford and John Kaliski in 1999.¹³ Influenced by the thinking of Lefebvre, it explicitly rejects the aesthetics of ‘new urbanism’ in favour of an empirical approach of studying and recording the activities of everyday life. Inherent in this approach is an appreciation of the fine grain of the city. ‘Everyday spaces’ are defined by Crawford as ‘a diffuse landscape of banal, repetitive and “non-design” locations’¹⁴ – a city’s public spaces, markets and streets.

This approach also begins to develop thinking about the temporal nature of the city where changes such as the appropriation of space for different activities and by different groups is part of the urban dynamic. This in turn opens the door to new forms of urbanism that develop from activism to embrace a shift in power towards active community participation. Here the architect becomes a ‘player’ and design moves beyond mere speculation on form to become involved in the realisation, curation and management of urban space. As a result, the city can be viewed as a series of temporary events and this contributes a new dynamic to urban planning and design, a perspective that extends urban thinking further into the field of experience. This is explored by Bishop and Williams in their book *The Temporary City*.¹⁵

Breareley had been influenced by the thinking of British urbanists and architects, most notably Alison and Peter Smithson, and the anarchist social observer Colin Ward. He drew on a peculiarly British strand of

urban thinking that recognised and celebrated all the ‘stuff’ of cities – a wider range of elements than the conventional building blocks of many mainstream European urban theorists. These included components as disparate as industrial areas, housing estates, motorways, derelict land, retail sheds, football pitches and cemeteries, together with what goes on in such settings. Brearley recognised the primacy of the street and the significance of both formal and informal urban spaces, and took close interest in the ‘found’ elements of the urban fabric and the activity it hosted, which the city shaper could choose to work with rather than obliterate. Deeply embedded in this thinking was an antithesis towards planning as a mechanism for pursuing ‘neatness’.

At Cambridge, Brearley’s contact with Peter Salter (ex-Smithsons) and Peter Carl had reinforced the idea of the value of first-hand experience and the power of urban narratives. He also encountered Josep Lluís Mateo’s work through *Quaderns* and Hans Kollhoff (who had worked with Oswald Ungers and Wim Wenders on the concept of the ‘green archipelago’ in Berlin).¹⁶ Before joining the A+UU, Brearley had been a partner with Julian Lewis in the architecture firm East. Their work was propositional and challenging. For instance, the River Places project considered the area around Rainham village and the marshes on either side of the Thames and reimagined them as a part-wild pleasure garden that spanned the river. Harnessed to this was a particular form of British activism which challenged conventional planning strategies from within the process. Earlier in his career Brearley had been involved with a People’s Plan for the Royal Docks and was an advisor to one of the more successful City Challenge programmes in Stratford. This experience brought with it a deep scepticism of conventional planning and a desire to shape new ways of working.

The resulting approach to urbanism was grounded in a careful examination of the ways in which the city functions. It stressed the importance of survey, mapping and documentation as well as a thorough understanding of urban form and function. From this emerged an urbanism based on small adjustments rather than grand interventions. These interventions were to be framed by the structure of the city, by its big roads and its high streets, its suburbs and its infrastructures. This was perhaps the essential element that UK thinking brought to the understanding of cities and urban form. This was an urbanism of negotiation, of understanding that process was a key part of design and that the perfect plan was always likely to be sidelined by the reality of the situation. It was not incompatible with European mainstream thinking at the time, but it did add a dose of healthy pragmatism.

The development of a methodology

The approach of the A+UU owed much to the thinking emerging from places such as the Architecture Association (AA). Brearley's time at the AA in the 1990s had brought him into contact with like-minded practitioners such as Tony Fretton and Peter St John. Their thinking explored the gaps in the planning system that might be filled with new design strategies – to create a 'culture of the ordinary'.¹⁷ A number of practitioners had come together at the AA in the 90s and these contacts would be a strong thread through the work of both the A+UU and DfL. These people, who included Peter Beard, Liza Fior and Julian Lewis, were to form a London network of practices that blended design agency with conviction. In particular, the notion of 'bottom-up' urbanism would be developed into an operational methodology that would fuse design with activism. Underlying this was a deep-seated belief that urban design was about the 'carefulness of urban change' and about the designer being an agent of change in the city. Design was not a matter of neutrality or a debate about the aesthetics of architecture. As a group they were interested in the potential of urban planning as a vehicle for radical change.

This background gave the A+UU a sense of curiosity, but one based on serious empirical research. The city might be open to new forms of experimentation, but these should not be frivolous. In this there was a fundamental difference in approach from that of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. Design was not about being a commentator, it was about active involvement; and while design review might make a scheme better, it would never act as a powerful change agent in the city. The designer should be prepared to take a position. In Mark Brearley's words, 'Design is where you make drawings to work out what you are going to do before *you do it*.'¹⁸

As a new team, the A+UU had the advantage of starting from a clean slate. Without any specific powers or funding, they used their knowledge of London to grow a portfolio of regeneration projects developed in cooperation with TfL and the LDA. These mayoral bodies both owned land and had the budgets for urban infrastructure that the A+UU lacked. This 'catch and steer' approach was opportunistic. It relied on the fact that there was so much happening in London that any form of comprehensive involvement would be impossible. In any event, the team did not have any powers or control. Collaboration, on the other hand, allowed the team to influence projects and to deflect them into better outcomes.

Richard Rogers had highlighted this cross-organisational, collaborative, site-specific and evidence-based approach as the key missing ingredient in the implementation of regeneration frameworks. However, the A+UU's involvement was not statutory and was reliant on good working relationships with the various clients, stakeholders, landowners and funders. This was challenging since the role and value of design was frequently questioned by other stakeholders who often held contradictory views on value within the regeneration context. While the A+UU sometimes met with hostility, it could offer strategic knowledge-gathering, an overview of initiatives across London government and fresh ideas. As a result, it gained credibility and some of the decision-makers started to appreciate the benefits of well-designed regeneration and were willing to give the team a role at the table.

The A+UU identified and addressed London-wide strategic issues such as the lack of good civic spaces and the role of strategic landscapes. From this thinking emerged a public space programme: 100 Public Spaces and the East London Green Grid. The team also began working in challenging areas for regeneration, such as Barking, Dagenham and the wider Thames Gateway. Here the mayor owned significant areas of land, and strategic design thinking was much needed. These localities had been largely neglected by planning, and the A+UU's involvement in the place-shaping process was more readily accepted by the boroughs and the LDA. These were also places where new ideas could be piloted. The team's approach of research, local knowledge-gathering and collaborative working and its appreciation of the intrinsic value of 'found' assets resulted in its methods being trusted and understood. In almost all collaborations with the boroughs, additional projects were subsequently developed and, with these, long-term associations with the places.

This methodology encouraged new conversations between the mayor's separate regeneration teams, especially in the more deprived areas of the city. Achieving tangible change on the ground in these areas was entirely consistent with the mayor's desire to address social deprivation in the capital. The A+UU's most significant work was delivered through 'conceptual masterplanning'. The City East project (see below) was an enquiry into the nature of London's future growth into the Thames Gateway and posed questions as to why growth and investment were not happening in an area with available land, proximity to the central area and good transport infrastructure. This work focused on the brand and identity of City East and the need for collective dialogue across the mayor's family of organisations and with other stakeholders.

This approach was later developed by DfL into the Green Enterprise District (see [Chapter 2](#)) and the Royal Docks Regeneration Strategy (see [Chapter 6](#)).

This deliberately pragmatic and opportunistic approach had both negative and positive results. The loose and ad hoc nature of the A+UU's involvement and the services and skills it offered allowed for tactical targeting of projects. But for the outsider, a lack of clarity on its role, combined with a lack of understanding of its approach, created mistrust and tension. Its perceived 'special relationship' with the mayor through Richard Rogers also caused a degree of envy and mistrust.

The approach developed by the A+UU is summarised below under a series of subheadings.¹⁹

'Big ideas – small actions'

The A+UU recognised that it had to operate strategically and seek to influence rather than dictate. Consequently, a series of programmes were put together that could operate on a metropolitan scale, capturing the imagination of Londoners, but would also allow incremental implementation ([Figure 1.2](#)). Implementation was often opportunistic through a series of small-scale projects. These might be funded and managed by different public and private agencies and could be implemented in almost any sequence as funding became available. Individually they had little impact, but collectively they could transform places and lives.



Figure 1.2 Big ideas – small actions: analysis of opportunities for intervention on high streets and road corridors in London. Source: A+UU/Mark Brearley/GLA.

‘Catch and steer’

‘Catch and steer’ linked the idea of making small adjustments to the city to the political reality of a relatively weak institution of London government. Too many different agencies, all of them considerably more powerful than the A+UU, were involved in projects. It would have been impossible to influence more than a fraction of the projects generated within London government. It was also considered somewhat futile to produce an objective matrix of criteria that might assess which projects were or were not worth consideration. Government was not that logical and in any case the A+UU did not have the power automatically to intervene, especially as many agencies jealously guarded their turf. ‘Catch and steer’ was essentially opportunistic. The team would pick up projects and try and mould them into more effective configurations. To achieve this, it focused on building working relationships with organisations and individuals that were sympathetic to its aims and wanted to cooperate with it. ‘Catch and steer’ can be traced back to East’s contribution to the 1996 Future Southwark exhibition²⁰ and was succinctly described by Brearley as ‘defining selective strategies for change, making the difficult jumps between desire to save and willingness to erase, and embracing the diversity of what determines place’.²¹

‘Mapping and understanding’

Some of the early conceptual plans produced by the A+UU set out its approach to spatial thinking on a metropolitan scale (Figure 1.3). This was clearly influenced by new public spaces in Barcelona, as well as Jan Gehl’s thinking about the public realm. It also recognised the London context of streets as places rather than simply connectors. The dual focus on places and streets was a theme that carried through into the work of DfL. It fused Continental European and British thinking on the nature of place, but the projects that flowed from this idea also illustrate the divergence of British and European urban thinking. Inherent in this thinking is the important idea that the city is essentially a ‘messy place’. This reflected the ideas of Christopher Alexander: that the ‘natural’ city does not conform to formal geometries or constructs but comprises a rich mix of different but essentially organic elements.²² The approach fitted both the urban condition of London and its political realities. Formal notions of design were expanded to include

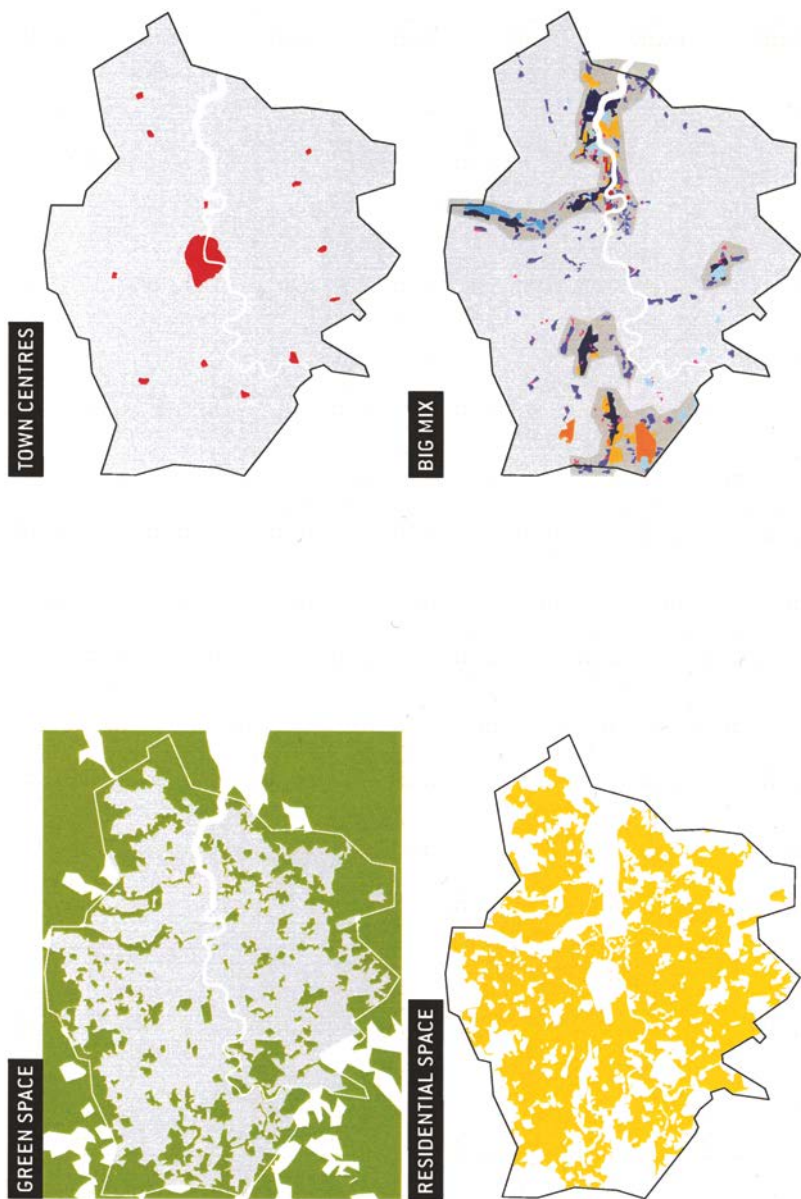


Figure 1.3 Mapping and masterplanning: A+UU studies of London. Source: A+UU/Mark Brearley/GLA.

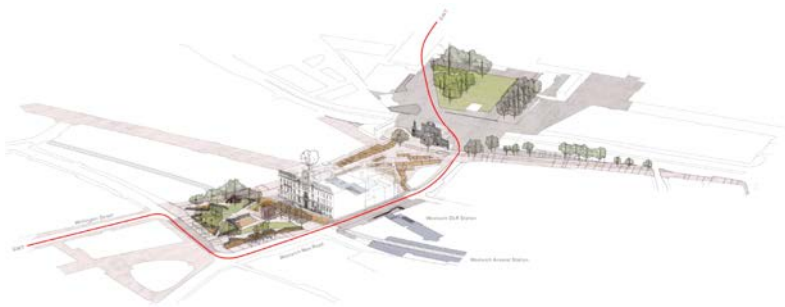


Figure 1.4 Woolwich town centre masterplan. Source: A+UU/GLA/Witherford Watson Mann.

the messy realities of roads, industrial areas, wastelands and suburbs. Design interventions were also fashioned around the social condition of neighbourhoods to address poverty and deprivation. To be relevant, urbanism had to engage.

‘Do the drawings, win the argument’

The A+UU’s work was strategic, deliberately propositional and backed by research and analysis. It could change scale from the metropolis to the neighbourhood, from the conceptual to the design of the street block or the quality of finish of street paving. The common element was the use of drawings (Figure 1.4) and ‘minted phrases’ to communicate ideas, capture imagination and garner support. In this respect its work was the very opposite of the norm for a public agency.

Continuity through relationships

From the start there was a clear realisation that the A+UU’s work would be time-limited. Urban change on the scale that was required would only be possible by working through others, agencies that would almost certainly outlast the team itself. Partnerships were based on building trust. What the A+UU could offer was knowledge of London, the ability to make connections and the luxury of being able to think, research and develop new perspectives. This was a fragile opportunity, but influence was possible if the team could embed itself in organisations and communities and ‘become the locals’.

Working within political structures

The A+UU's approach was specifically shaped by the political realities of working in Livingstone's 'court of the Medicis'. The power rested with the mayor. There was no formal relationship between the mayor and his advisors, and business therefore had to be conducted through informal conversations, social networks and ad hoc meetings. This worked well enough for advisors who were prepared to spend time in the mayoral suite of offices on the top floor of City Hall, but it posed difficulties for Rogers, who as a part-time specialist advisor was also running a major architectural practice. Although he had the respect of the mayor, he was not part of the inner circle of advisors or policy-makers. Initially, within such a young and evolving government institution, this did not matter too much. Rogers and the team had regular meetings with the mayor and decisions were made to develop ideas and programmes. There was no formal process for these decisions to be put into practice other than the fact that the mayor had agreed them. In the early days this was an advantage as the team was developing ideas and the mayor's backing was sufficient to make other agencies cooperate. But later the mayoral advisors entrenched their positions and protected their turf and the mayoral agencies developed their own programmes and funding streams. The A+UU worked within this environment by influencing and shaping but was always aware of the political and organisational tensions. In order to avoid creating a threatening profile, it eschewed any notion of authorship or ownership of ideas. Instead, it sought to seed ideas in other organisations such as TfL and the boroughs, allowing others to lead. Its prevailing strategy was to be seen as a responder rather than an initiator. Others could take the credit as long as the project was developed.

On the whole Livingstone was interested in the ideas that the A+UU generated but would intervene where necessary to ensure that they were in accordance with his political agenda. His agenda moved from the global to the local. He knew London intimately and could read plans and drawings. From his pivotal position at the centre of London government, he knew how to exercise control and if necessary play parts of the organisation off against each other. Inevitably within this environment the A+UU, while strategic, had to operate tactically. It did the drawings and coined the phrases that framed an important set of new initiatives that it carefully inserted into parts of the organisation that were open to its approach. Ultimately, these had a significant impact on the way London developed under the new mayor.

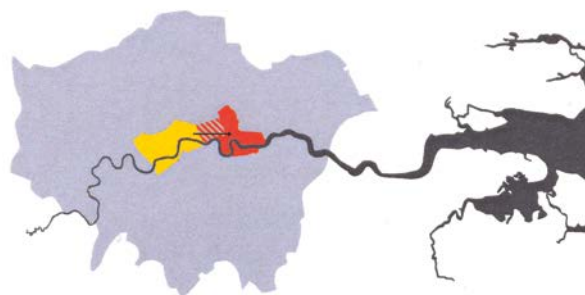
First projects

City East

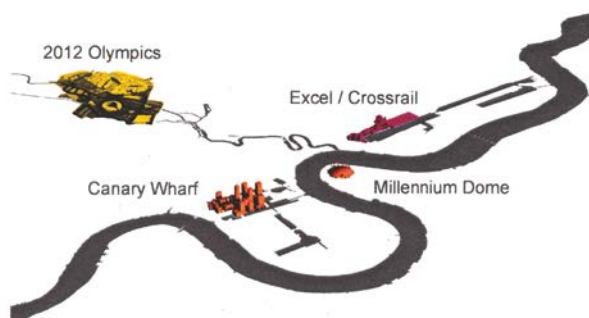
Initially, the A+UU decided to concentrate on engaging with a small number of locations that were experiencing major change and where it could have a significant impact. The first places that were selected included Bishopsgate Goods Yard and the Thames Gateway. Bishopsgate Goods Yard had a long and complex planning and development history and was a highly contentious site. It soon became apparent that existing stakeholders would not welcome a new (and largely untried) organisation to the party. Such places were not suited to a 'light touch' approach and the experiment was not repeated.

The London Thames Gateway offered better opportunities for involvement. Despite the obvious potential in the area, little was actually happening and Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott wanted action. A key issue was the property market's perception of the area. The 'Thames Gateway' was perceived as too vague a concept, too big and frankly too difficult. The infrastructure was poor, many of the sites were contaminated and low market values deterred risk-taking. There was also no single project to catch the imagination. In the early days of the A+UU, Tim Williams, Director of the Thames Gateway Partnership and a ministerial advisor to the Blair government, counselled the unit to 'focus on the east and work in Barking and Havering'. The two boroughs were rather 'off the radar' for those thinking about London, but they were acutely aware of the problems that they were facing and were open to assistance.

City East was effectively a simple exercise in branding the area that was both vague and precise. The proposition started with a set of bold statements that City East might only constitute 3 per cent of the area of London but it was set to accommodate 25 per cent of London's growth (Figure 1.5). This conceptual work was based on survey work and a detailed knowledge of the area. Each area was considered through a set of questions around 'the consequence of change in each area'. This allowed a set of propositions to be discussed with the boroughs through a process of 'negotiated urbanism'. Because the options highlighted the consequences of different scenarios, the A+UU were able to assess the degree of change that was acceptable to boroughs and agree where plans and proposals might be developed further. This form of non-statutory plan-making set many of the parameters for the subsequent regeneration of east London. It took place before London was awarded the 2012



25% of London's growth is likely to be in just 3% of its area - 'City East' - over the next 20 years



four key 'institutional' drivers for change

Figure 1.5 City East: the centre for London's growth. Source: A+UU/ Mark Brearley/GLA.

Olympics and considered alternative scenarios for the area that could respond to whether London won the Games or not. It also left behind strong working relationships that made the A+UU the natural point of coordination for cross-borough projects. The A+UU presented the concept in a diagrammatic and non-threatening way that demonstrated the potential of east London and was designed to build enthusiasm and support (Figure 1.6).

While this was an entirely conceptual piece of work, it did refocus discussion on London's eastward growth and underline the area's potential. The LDA responded by redirecting funds into land decontamination and infrastructure improvements. City East also articulated an important characteristic of the regeneration of east London. Despite being a priority for both national and local government for over a decade,

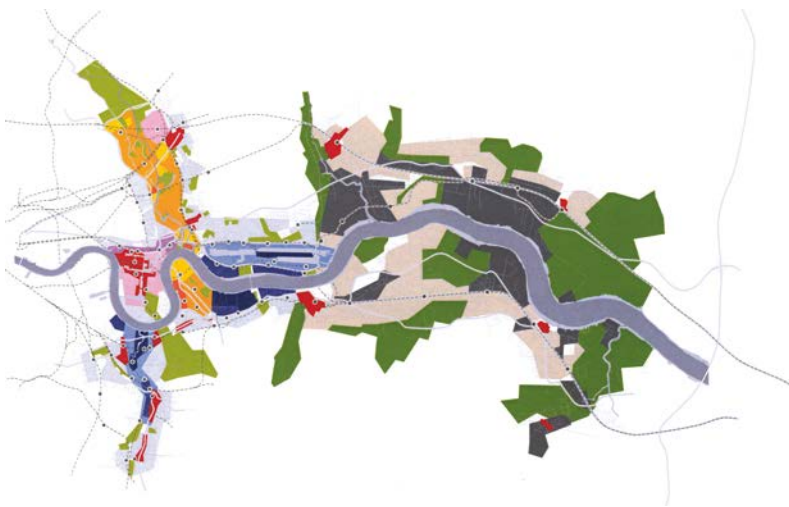


Figure 1.6 City East: analysis of the morphology of the London Thames Gateway. Source: A+UU/Mark Brearley/GLA.

progress had never been smooth or easy. Change had occurred, but in a series of ‘eastward lurches’ – Canary Wharf, City Airport, the London Exhibition Centre (ExCeL London) and the Millennium Dome/Greenwich Peninsula. Between each of these ‘lurches’ there had been no continuity. Infrastructure had often been put in retrospectively and, while each ‘move’ was important in its own right, none had provided sufficient momentum to trigger the next move. Where there had been development, it had been driven by the public rather than private sector. Although not attributable to the A+UU and the City East concept, the next big ‘lurch’ eastward would be the 2012 London Olympics. Arguably, this has finally produced the momentum to achieve the long-term regeneration of east London.

The City East concept spawned a series of smaller initiatives that latched onto mayoral budgets that were allocated within the Thames Gateway. These funds were channelled into projects in specific places and coherent strategies were written to aid the consolidation of existing town centres and growth areas. One such initiative was Barking town centre, where a sympathetic borough (Barking and Dagenham) was keen to improve one of the poorest places in London. The A+UU set up a methodology for town-centre and high-street interventions that were later developed by DfL (Figure 1.7). This programme is covered in more detail in Chapter 3.

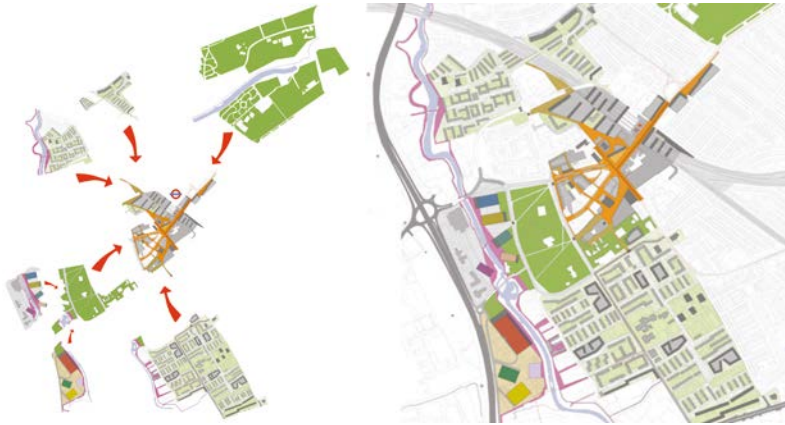


Figure 1.7 Barking town centre: analysis of form and connections. Source: A+UU/GLA/Mark Brearley.

The Mayor's 100 Public Spaces programme

A second initiative, influenced by both Barcelona and Copenhagen, drew on the theme of public space improvements and became the Mayor's 100 Public Spaces programme (Figure 1.8). The title of the programme reflected the philosophy of 'Big Ideas'. In fact, there were never 100 public spaces in the programme, just a desire to create as many as possible. The programme would be design-driven and was specifically structured to address the fact that there was no budget and that implementation would require partnership. The effects of this initiative and its evolution into the Mayor's Great Spaces programme are covered in more

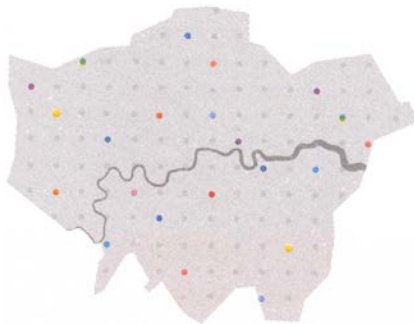


Figure 1.8 The Mayor's 100 Public Spaces programme. Source: A+UU/Mark Brearley.



Figure 1.9 London Green Grid. Source: *East London Green Grid Primer*, GLA, 2006.

detail in [Chapter 3](#). The first 10 spaces were identified in 2004, design teams were selected and work commenced.²³

The East London Green Grid

The East London Green Grid (ELGG) developed the ideas of public space at the metropolitan scale and reimagined London as a regional park ([Figure 1.9](#)). It was significantly influenced by Florian Beigel's masterplans in Berlin and Leipzig. In Richard Rogers' words, it aimed to create 'peopled landscapes'.²⁴ The project mapped and recorded east London's neglected and often degraded urban spaces, its *terrains vagues* – landscapes of electricity pylons and wastelands, of commons, heaths, marshes and forgotten watercourses. These were neglected urban leftovers, but they were rich in potential. The ELGG devised multiple interventions to upgrade them, manage them and link them strategically into a connected green network. This network would eventually join the countryside outside London. The project is covered in more detail in [Chapter 5](#).

Housing and the Compact City

Housing and the Compact City²⁵ developed ideas from the Urban Task Force and applied them to London. London's population was growing but the city was constrained from expanding outwards by the green belt.

The book spelt out a vision for a compact city on a European model, that recycled brownfield land and provided new public spaces within well-designed but high-rise, dense developments. The book explained the mayor's policies on housing density and illustrated them with different typologies at different densities. It was part design manual, part policy document and part manifesto and it fed into the new London Plan. It was the basis for a later involvement in housing policy that led to the 2010 London Housing Design Guide, covered in more detail in [Chapter 4](#).

Streetscape Design Manual

The final major initiative was the Streetscape Design Manual. This stemmed from an early concern with the fundamental importance of the street. It reflected a reaction to the orthodoxy of the 1970s and 1980s where the segregation of cars and pedestrians had so damaged the richness of civic life.

The work of thinkers and practitioners such as Jan Gehl had already permeated approaches to street design in the UK. From the 1990s, the supremacy of the car was being challenged in the UK in favour of an improved public realm and the notion that streets could be people-oriented social spaces. An early practical illustration of these ideas may be seen in the series of interventions that improved pedestrian routes to the new Tate Modern as part of the extension of London's South Bank, on which Brearley had worked for several years before joining the A+UU.²⁶ With the establishment of the GLA and the new office of mayor, the Architecture Foundation launched an ideas competition that featured the theme of 'Car Free London',²⁷ ideas that chimed with the findings of the Urban Task Force.

The work on street design was the beginning of an important new interface between the A+UU and TfL. TfL was now under the direction of the mayor who was transforming it from a highway agency into a transport agency. A new commissioner, Bob Kiley, brought in from New York, was charged with developing an integrated agency under the political control of the mayor. His appointment opened up London to new ideas, influences and business practices from America. He also knew Richard Rogers, and this gave the A+UU useful access into TfL.

The Streetscape Design Manual was initially a reaction to the poor quality of London's streets. The 1980s and 1990s had been difficult times for many of the inner London Labour-controlled boroughs. They had resisted the spending cuts of the Thatcher government and had borrowed heavily in the expectation of a change of government. When this did not

happen a number of boroughs faced serious financial difficulties. Added to this was a degree of internal mismanagement. In many cases money had been diverted away from highways maintenance to fund other programmes such as housing, leisure and community buildings. In certain areas London's streets were literally falling apart. Even where this was not happening the boroughs generally lacked long-term plans for street maintenance and the result was a hotchpotch of different styles and materials. These problems were compounded by the split of responsibilities for maintenance between TfL and the boroughs. Although TfL had leverage in the form of annual capital grants to the boroughs, these were based on traffic flow and safety criteria and there was no design control or project sign-off.

The catalyst for a comprehensive streetscape design guide was a walk that the A+UU team and Richard Rogers made around Bermondsey (actually en route to their Christmas lunch). A file of photos was put together documenting the appalling state of street surfaces and this was sent to TfL. Kiley responded with an invitation to undertake research into best practice and compile a design manual. The principles were simple enough:

- Streets were background, not foreground.
- Over-elaborate design was costly, was likely to be difficult to maintain and would soon look dated.
- A simple palette of materials, including granite kerbs and large block paving slabs, best reflected the existing character of London streets.
- Good design was about getting the basics right and this included care over construction and finishes (Figure 1.10).
- Excessive street furniture, including guard rails, should be removed wherever practical.
- Street lighting should be rationalised and attached to buildings wherever possible.

The *London Streetscape Design Manual* was published in 2006, and eventually its use became a condition of TfL funding for capital projects. It is still used extensively today. This was the A+UU's first major success in influencing design quality through policy rather than through project appraisal. It became a template for the future work of DfL.



- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 Traditional paving extended to kerb | 5 Signal head on lighting column | 9 'Heritage' lighting retained |
| 2 Traditional kerbs retained | 6 Footway lighting added | 10 All street furniture finished in black (excluding central reserve barrier) |
| 3 Inspection cover replaced with insert cover | 7 Luminaire appropriate for urban centre location | 11 Bus lane surface pigmentation corrected to end at stop line |
| 4 Concrete bollards replaced | 8 Traffic bollards replaced by 'hoop' design | |



Figure 1.10 Images from the *London Streetscape Design Manual* showing principles and examples of detailing. Source: *London Streetscape Design Manual*, GLA/TfL, 2006.

An end and a new beginning

In the 2004 London mayoral election, Ken Livingstone was re-elected. With a second political term came the opportunity to prioritise different agendas, and Livingstone sought to develop London government's design capacity further by bringing together the different regeneration teams in the GLA family to form one team.

While the collaborative nature of the work that the unit initiated was widely supported, their style and working methods were being questioned by those unfamiliar with a design-led process and there was a managerial desire to bring it under closer operational control. In 2006 the regeneration and urban design teams from the GLA (the A+UU), the LDA and TfL joined to form one new design team, renamed Design for London (DfL). The professional backgrounds to this agglomeration of teams included architects, planners, road engineers, urban designers and general office support. The director of this new team, Peter Bishop, had previously been the Director of Planning and Environment at the London Borough of Camden. He was a planner by training but had worked closely with architects and urbanists throughout his career and at Camden had overseen the planning of the King's Cross scheme. He was also seen as a government insider who had delivered major projects in overtly political environments. This was a strategic move to 'enable design to be understood and communicated to all professions involved in city regeneration'.²⁸

Conclusions

The A+UU was a small and innovative unit that survived for five years in the formative days of the GLA. It developed a set of powerful ideas for London and was successful in inserting these subversively into other agencies' agendas. It established both a design methodology and a *modus operandi* that were later taken up by DfL. This methodology signified a return to a debate about urban living and the importance of urban form. It was optimistic and at times idealistic, but its work was always rigorous and value-based. Such values are often overlooked in the day-to-day world of urban government. One of the A+UU's significant contributions was to explore the limits of design and to pilot new ideas, thus acting as a bridge between the proposals of the Urban Task Force (and the agenda of the Blair government) and the real world. London,

with its new confidence and booming economy, was a fertile ground for experimentation. It is difficult to assess the A+UU's long-term success and impact. It certainly achieved a 'niche' position and a small but influential international following, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands. Some of its early programmes, such as the 100 Public Spaces and East London Green Grid, continue in different forms today. Others, like the town-centre work, have had lasting beneficial impacts.

The problems that the unit faced were as much organisational and political as anything else. The mayor was interested in architecture and design, but it was not central to his agenda. He could see how it fitted into his broader political objectives and, all other things being equal, he recognised that design had a role to play in his strategies for promoting London on the global stage. Richard Rogers, though respected, did not have the same degree of influence over the mayor as other, full-time advisors. The model of a mayor driving urban change through design, as had been the case with Barcelona, was not on the agenda for London. In addition, the structure of political advisors based around the mayor in City Hall meant that the A+UU was always seen as slightly suspect and was kept on the periphery. Its work would be appreciated where it coincided with another agenda, but where it did not it was viewed as lightweight and at times an irritant. In this context there was no automatic mechanism for follow-through on many good ideas, which ultimately limited the influence of the team.

The A+UU was made up of young architects, few of whom had had any senior experience in the public sector. It was on a steep learning curve in an environment dominated by experienced, and at times cynical, operators. In embarking on some projects it failed to understand the complexity of the problems, particularly on public space programmes that entailed working within labyrinthine internal procedures and where there were legitimate technical objections to their ideas. That said, the A+UU pioneered public realm programmes in a period when the emphasis was still biased in favour of vehicles and when public space was seen by many in government as a somewhat frivolous luxury.

The impact of the unit also needs to be viewed in the context of the re-establishment of the GLA. The boroughs had enjoyed a degree of freedom since the abolition of the GLC, and a new metropolitan body, although largely welcomed, was not necessarily trusted. This lack of trust extended to the new mayor, who was seen by some as trying to carve out a role at their expense.²⁹

There was a gradual change in the management of the unit. The initial freedom that it enjoyed was slowly curtailed as it became

embedded in the bureaucracy of London government. It is possible that its freedom and patronage were resented, but it is certain that a free-thinking and occasionally maverick team was treated with suspicion within a management hierarchy which sensed the potential danger of initiatives that could not be tightly controlled.

The A+UU operated in a difficult political environment. Much of the thinking that it developed in the early years of the GLA around public space, streets and landscape is now mainstream, but was not then. It benefited from the fluid nature of the newly constituted GLA but lacked experience in working in a government bureaucracy that was dominated by politically savvy operators. That said, the A+UU did have a significant impact on London and many of its initiatives are still apparent today. The real strength of the A+UU and possibly its most important legacy was its deeply held belief that the condition of the city could be improved, and that design was essentially a *political* activity that could do this. It set a foundation of thinking and work without which DfL would have struggled to make a mark.

Notes

- 1 Initiated by the Thatcher government as a response to political opposition from the left-wing Greater London Council. See Department of the Environment 1983 and *Local Government Act 1985*.
- 2 The population declined from 8.6 million in 1939 to 6.7 million in 1986. Source: Greater London Authority 2017.
- 3 Kleihues and Klotz 1986.
- 4 Originally coined in 1967 by the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, this 'brand' generally embraced the emerging club, art, fashion and music scene of the 1990s.
- 5 Urban Task Force 1999.
- 6 Urban Task Force 1999.
- 7 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2000.
- 8 Urban Task Force 2005.
- 9 Livingstone's nomination as the Labour candidate was opposed by Tony Blair and the Party. He stood as an independent candidate against the Labour candidate Frank Dobson. He was later readmitted to the Party.
- 10 Conversation with Peter Bishop in March 2001.
- 11 Richard Brown, interviewed by Lara Kinneir, 9 March 2017.
- 12 Brown 2002.
- 13 Chase, Crawford and Kaliski 1999.
- 14 Chase, Crawford and Kaliski 1999.
- 15 Bishop and Williams 2012.
- 16 Ungers and Koolhaas 2013.
- 17 Ward 2011.
- 18 Interview with Mark Brearley, February 2020.
- 19 Interview with Mark Brearley, March 2019.
- 20 <https://www.architecturefoundation.org.uk/programme/1996/future-southwark>
- 21 Brearley 1997.

- 22 Alexander 1965.
- 23 The first 10 spaces were Windrush Square (Brixton), Exhibition Road and Sloane Square (Kensington & Chelsea), Euston underpass (Camden), Gillett Square (Hackney), Lewisham town centre, Lower Marsh (Lambeth), Coulsdon High Street (Croydon), Rainham village centre (Havering), Victoria Embankment gardens (Westminster).
- 24 Scalbert 2013.
- 25 Greater London Authority 2003.
- 26 East 1998.
- 27 Architecture Foundation, September 1998 to February 1999, competition for a car-free London.
- 28 Richard Brown, interviewed by Lara Kinneir, 9 March 2017.
- 29 For further detail, see Bishop and Williams 2016.

Bibliography

- Alexander, Christopher, 'A City is Not a Tree', *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 122, No. 1, April 1965, pp. 58–62 (Part I), Vol. 122, No. 2, May 1965, pp. 58–62 (Part II). <https://www.patternlanguage.com/archive/cityisnotatree.html> (accessed 15 March 2020).
- Bishop, Peter, and Williams, Lesley, *The Temporary City*, London: Routledge, 2012.
- Bishop, Peter, and Williams, Lesley, *Planning, Politics and City Making: A Case Study of King's Cross*, London: RIBA Publishing, 2016.
- Brearley, Mark, 'Determining Places', *Cambridge Architecture Journal*, No. 9, 1997, pp. 4–5.
- Brearley, Mark, 'A Conversation with Mark Brearley', *Scroope: Cambridge Architecture Journal*, No. 14, 2002, pp. 28–9.
- Brown, Richard, *GLA Business Report No. 8: Architecture and Urbanism Unit Staff*, Greater London Authority, 2 December 2002.
- Chase, John, Crawford, Margaret, and Kaliski, John (eds), *Everyday Urbanism*, New York: Monacelli Press, 1999.
- Department of the Environment, *Streamlining the Cities: White Paper*, London: HMSO, 1983.
- East (Brearley, Mark), 'Adjusting a Street', *Scroope: Cambridge Architecture Journal*, No. 10, 1998, pp. 74–7.
- Greater London Authority, *Housing and the Compact City*, Greater London Authority, 2003.
- Greater London Authority, *East London Green Grid Primer*, Greater London Authority, 2006.
- Greater London Authority, *London Plan 2016*, January 2017. <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning/london-plan/current-london-plan/london-plan-2016-pdf> (accessed 24 February 2020).
- Greater London Authority/Transport for London, *London Streetscape Design Manual*, Greater London Authority/Transport for London, 2006.
- Kleihues, Josef Paul, and Klotz, Heinrich, *International Building Exhibition Berlin 1987: Examples of New Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli, 1986.
- Lichtenstein, Claude, and Schreggenberger, Thomas (eds), *As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary*, Zurich, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 1993.
- Lluís Mateo, Josep (ed.), *Quaderns*, No. 177. Barcelona, Spain: Association of Catalan Architects, 1988.
- Local Government Act 1985*, London: HMSO, 1985.
- McCreery, Sandy, 'East: Practice Profile', *Architectural Design*, Vol. 70, No. 4, 2000, pp. 106–9.
- Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), *Our Towns and Cities – the Future: The Urban White Paper*, ODPM, 2000.
- Scalbert, Irénée, 'London After the Green Belt', *AA Files*, No. 66, 2013. https://www.thomasdanegallery.com/user/documents/press/download_url/510/ml-aa-files-2013.pdf (accessed 24 February 2020).
- Smithson, Alison, and Smithson, Peter, *Ordinariness and Light: Urban Theories 1952–1960 and Their Application in a Building Project 1963–1970*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970.
- Ungers, Oswald Mathias, and Koolhaas, Rem, *The City in The City – Berlin: A Green Archipelago: A Manifesto (1977) by Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas [with others]*, edited by

- Florian Hertweck and Sébastien Marot, UAA Ungers Archives for Architectural Research, Zurich, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013.
- Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, London: HMSO, 1999.
- Urban Task Force, *Towards a Strong Urban Renaissance*, London: HMSO, 2005. http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Society/documents/2005/11/22/UTF_final_report.pdf (accessed 24 February 2020).
- Ward, Colin, *Autonomy, Solidarity, Possibility: The Colin Ward Reader*, edited by Damian F. White and Chris Wilbert, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011.