

Mix, *balance,* and integrate!

The 5.5-hectare Coin Street site is located in the heart of London, on the southern bank of the River Thames. It is now one of London's most visited areas. Remarkably, it is owned by a social enterprise, the members of which all live nearby. How did this happen?

IAIN TUCKETT

COVERING KEY STAGES AND CHALLENGES ACROSS 50 YEARS, IAIN TUCKETT SHARES HOW BRINGING TOGETHER RESOURCES FROM THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC REALM AND, MOST OF ALL, THE COMMUNITY ENABLED SENSITIVE DEVELOPMENT AIMED AT OPENING AND TRANSFORMING LONDON'S SOUTH BANK.

London grew up on the north bank, yet it was only during the industrial revolution that fields and marshes to the south were replaced by wharves, factories, and densely packed housing for the poor – for the poor because the Thames was polluted with sewage and flooded frequently, while the air was fouled by smoke from countless chimneys.

Concerns about public health sparked by regular outbreaks of cholera led, in 1855, to the establishment of London's first city-wide infrastructure body: the Metropolitan Board of Works. The Board was charged with construction of a system of main drainage, the embankment of the river Thames, street improvements, and oversight of building regula-

tions. Other duties followed: firefighting, housing improvement, Thames crossings, and responsibilities for parks and other open spaces. In 1888 the Board was replaced by a directly elected body, the London County Council (LCC).

It was LCC's engineers that noted how an accident of geography, a 90 degree bend of the River Thames, placed the South Bank mid-way between The City and West End – and thus became an obvious place for the expansion of both. When it was proposed that the LCC build its new headquarters on the South Bank, one councillor objected that it was “on the wrong side of the river ... in a very squalid neighbourhood ... and quite unworthy of the

dignity of a body like the council”. Another countered that “it would brighten up a dull place, sweeten a sour spot and for the first time bring the south of London into a dignified and beautiful frontage on the River Thames”. County Hall was formally opened in 1922.

The 1943 County of London Plan made explicit the objective of expanding The City and West End onto the southern bank of the Thames. Patrick Abercrombie, joint author of the Plan, wrote that “this development of the South Bank is the opportunity for the greatest spectacular effect of the new London”. There would be government and commercial offices, a picturesque riverside walkway with gardens, a cultural centre housing two new theatres, a



County of London Plan, 1943

concert hall, an assembly hall, sports facilities including a swimming pool, one or two hotels, cafés and restaurants.

In 1951, eleven hectares of LCC-owned land to the east of County Hall were cleared of warehouses and working-class housing to make way for the Festival of Britain: a post-war 'tonic for the nation'. When the Festival closed, the site was cleared apart from the Royal Festival Hall.

AFTER THE PARTY ENDED

Between 1958 and 1962, offices for Shell International were constructed on much of the Festival site. Various government offices, the London Television Centre and offices for the International Publishing Corporation (IPC), IBM and others relocated to the South Bank.

Meanwhile the residential population plummeted: from 50,000 at the start of the 20th century to just 4,500 by the 1970s. With the loss of population, local shops and

schools closed. The new wealth commuted into the area in the morning and commuted out in the evening. Office developments in this 'run-down' part of town incorporated internal restaurants and other facilities for their staff. In the case of Shell, these included a small supermarket, a swimming pool, a theatre, and a rifle range! Outside, the local economy was dying.

Gavin Stamp, writing in the 20th Century Society Journal described how: "the legacy of the Festival on the South Bank was unresolved planning and incoherent, windswept spaces; a no man's land in which a handful of aspiring cultural buildings are compromised by unresolved walkways and unpleasant underpasses and all overshadowed by the mediocrity of the Shell Tower and the criminal inhumanity of the Waterloo roundabout. This incomplete vision, this distorted memory of what once was, and could have been – still cut in half by that railway viaduct – has yet to be resolved".

RE-DESIGNATING DEVELOPMENT

The South Bank was considered 'alien' and 'inhospitable' and 'dead' at weekends. It was characterized by big footprint buildings, an absence of street-level public uses, sometimes 'brutal' or monolithic architecture, a lot of concrete, and little greenery. The few residents that remained lobbied politicians for a change in planning policies. Critically, they identified sites where new homes could be built or community facilities provided - and formed housing co-operatives and other community organisations to secure them.

The derelict Coin Street area between Waterloo and Blackfriars Bridges was part of the 'South Bank Comprehensive Development Area' declared by the LCC (replaced in 1965 by the Greater London Council, or GLC). In 1974, the national Government granted consent for what would then have been Europe's tallest hotel on one of the Coin Street sites. The developer wanted to build offices on two



The Coin Street Action Group gathering support for its development proposals, 1981

adjacent sites owned by the GLC. Local residents campaigned against the proposals and found the GLC sympathetic to their case. A design team led by GLC architect, Max Nasatyr, worked closely with our community-based Action Group to draw up proposals for housing on the sites.

But in 1977, a new GLC administration was elected and decided to stop work on housing and support office development instead. At this point Max Nasatyr and the Action Group developed a more ambitious housing and riverside park scheme covering the entire 5.5 hectare Coin Street area. The national Government announced that it, rather than the local planning authorities, would decide the future of the area. Competing developers put forward plans for large office developments. We applied for consent to build the community scheme.

In 1979 and 1982 the Government held two, year-long, public inquiries during which the future supply and demand for homes and offices, the role of central London, and the design merits of the various proposals were debated. After the first inquiry the Government rejected the office developments as ‘massive’ and ‘over-dominant’ and rejected the community scheme for ‘failing to exploit the employment potential’ of the sites. While

two of the office developers then joined forces and reduced by one storey the height of their scheme, the Action Group developed proposals that retained the iconic Oxo Tower Wharf and added managed workshops and leisure facilities to the community scheme.

In 1983 the Government granted consent for both the office and community schemes. The Government assumed that the office development would be built, since much of the land was owned by the office developers and the GLC had already signed an agreement to sell its land to the developers. By the time the Government announced its decisions, the Action Group had secured the support of the GLC and both local borough councils. With the property market experiencing a downturn and no sign of local opposition weakening, the private developers instead sold their land to the GLC. In 1984, under the leadership of future Mayor of Greater London Ken Livingstone, the GLC sold the Coin Street sites to Coin Street Community Builders (CSCB).

CSCB is a development trust set up by Action Group members. The company’s object is ‘to provide public service otherwise than for gain’. All members must live in the Waterloo or north Southwark area, and any profits must be ploughed back into the public

service object. To protect its independence, CSCB adopted a ‘social enterprise’ model where it derives income from commercial activities and uses this to pay for community programmes and the management and maintenance of its public realm.

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME?

Unlike most commercial schemes which fill the riverside with buildings, CSCB’s community scheme opened the riverside to the residential hinterland by creating a new park, Bernie Spain Gardens. It completed the South Bank riverside walkway without reclaiming land for further development along the foreshore. Unlike the large footprint schemes built elsewhere on the South Bank, CSCB’s development respects historic street patterns and facilitates pedestrian movement through the area.

In its first 15 years CSCB focused on the physical development of its site. The basic infrastructure of the riverside walkway and park and first housing co-operative development were completed in 1988. A valuation revealed that, when the park and riverside walkway opened, the value of surrounding buildings increased financially as well as in terms of amenity: it was estimated that the capital value of IBM’s building increased by some £15 million at historic prices (about £35 million today).

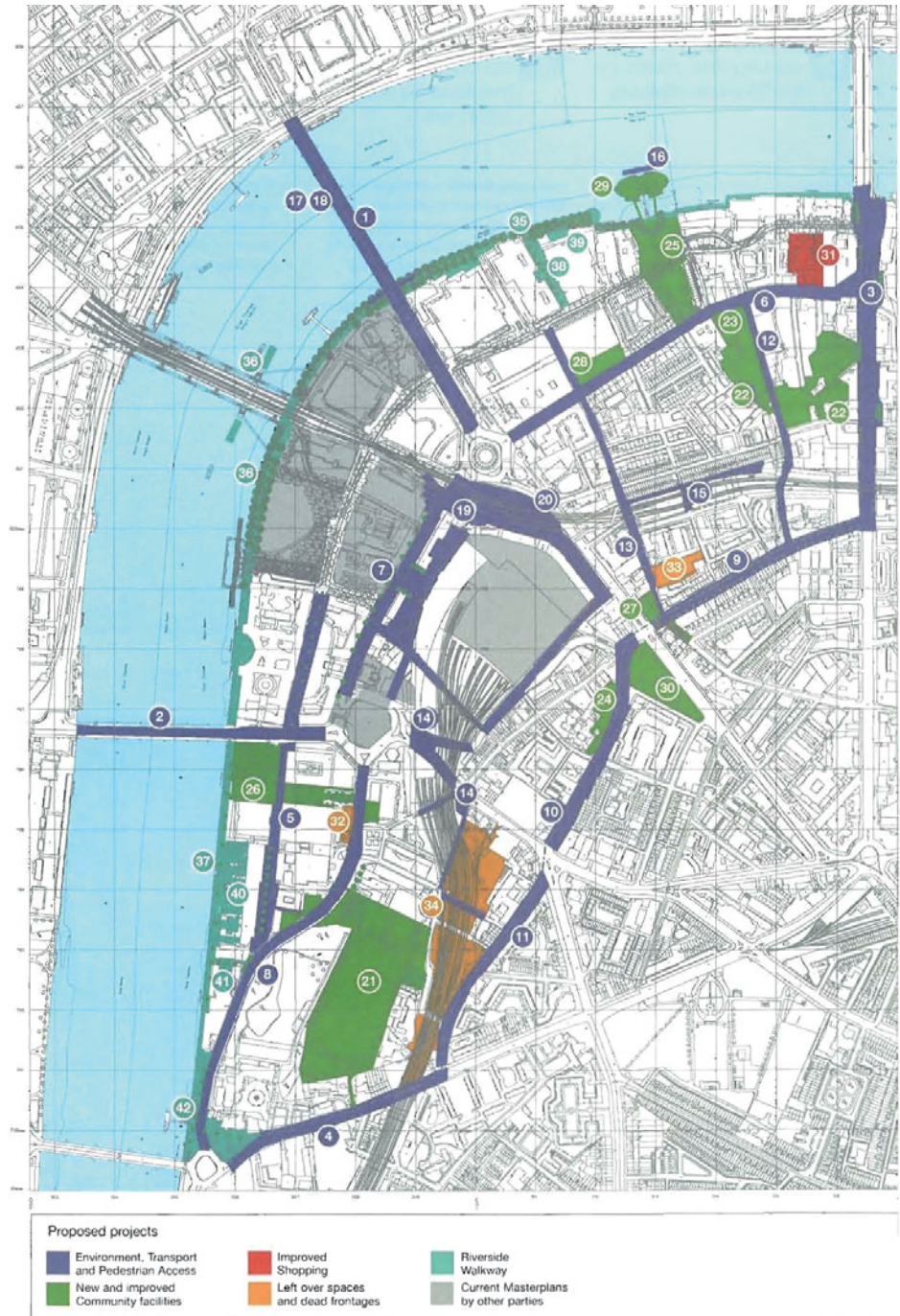
In light of this, we rather simplistically approached our neighbours saying: ‘Work with us, invest with us, and the value of your building will go up’. But many occupiers were tenants of pension funds and insurance companies: ‘Invest with us and your rent will go up’ was not such a good story! Nevertheless, many were concerned about attracting and retaining staff, since their employees felt the area was dangerous at night and lacking facilities during the day. At this time, staff from the London Television Centre asked for taxis to take them to nearby Waterloo Station at night, while IPC

“LONDON IS REDISCOVERING ITS ROOTS IN THE VILLAGES AND NEIGHBOURHOODS OF WHICH IT IS COMPRISED”

provided transport at lunchtime to take their staff across the river to shop in Covent Garden. The South Bank still had a long way to go to become the destination it is today.

In 1990 we formed South Bank Employers' Group (SBEG) with partners such as ITV, Shell International, Sainsbury and the national arts organisations. We commissioned the 'South Bank Environmental Improvement Report' which was published in 1994. The report proposed an urban design strategy and a 'menu' of 30 broadly costed projects to allow phased implementation as resources (land and money) became available.

The mix of national and international corporations, a growing residential population and the opening of Waterloo International at this prime location needed a plan. The goals of the strategy centred on changing the perception of The South Bank from a bleak and hostile area into London's gateway to Europe. The urban design strategy involved giving physical expression to the area's identity through wayfinding, high quality street furniture and landscaping, improving public transport and pedestrian access, as well as encouraging more street level activity while removing leftover spaces and dead frontages. Open space with riverside walkways and views, friendliness, cleanliness, colour, safety,



Extract from 2002 SBEG Urban Design Strategy

dynamism, and diversity were important. The strategy had the intent of transforming the area into a desirable destination for cultural pursuits, business and pleasure with a flourishing and cohesive residential community. The report attracted the attention of the Government, the local borough councils, local businesses and the wider community. Funding 'cocktails' brought together resources

from private, public and lottery bodies for priority projects. Most of the recommended interventions have subsequently been implemented, including improvements to the riverside walkway, new pedestrian footways on both sides of Hungerford Bridge, a transformation of the South Bank's 'spine route', removal of overhead walkways, and an area-wide wayfinding system.

ACTING LOCALLY THINKING GLOBALLY



From 'Passionate about our neighbourhood',
Coin Street Community Builders 2019

LEARNING FROM THE RESIDENTS

When it opened in 1988, our riverside walkway remained eerily quiet: the Coin Street area had remained derelict for so long that people weren't used to visiting it. CSCB opened a 'pop up' development adjacent to the walkway at Gabriel's Wharf – initially a single bar/restaurant and some 15 garage units with shopfronts accommodating design and retail 'work-shops'. Staff from surrounding office buildings forsook their internal canteens to visit for lunch or an evening drink. As more restaurants and 'work-shops' opened, more people came. In 1990 CSCB started regular festival events which drew large crowds at the weekend. Astute collective promotion of the South Bank by SBEG's marketing group increased the profile of the area domestically and then internationally. The opening of Oxo Tower Wharf in 1996 extended the public's perceptions of what was on offer, and the opening of The London Eye and Tate Modern in 2000 brought more crowds. In that year, the weight of litter collected on CSCB's public realm

trebled. From then, the issue was not attracting crowds but managing and maintaining the site.

In 1999 CSCB and SBEG had commissioned MORI to survey local residents in north Lambeth and north Southwark. We learned that local residents were less concerned about arts events and more concerned about the lack of public swimming and indoor and outdoor sports facilities, while prioritising childcare. In response, CSCB decided to pivot from festival events to investing in community facilities and programmes.

In 2002 an updated South Bank urban design strategy added social and community projects to the environmental interventions recommended. Outdoor sports facilities opened on Hatfields in 2005, the Coin Street neighbourhood centre with its family & children's centre opened in 2007, and a redesigned Jubilee Gardens opened in 2012. In the meantime, a major refurbishment of the Royal Festival Hall had been completed in 2007 bringing with it a renewed sense of the 1951 Festival and crowds enjoying just visiting the site.

A CASE STUDY FOR THE FUTURE

Today, London is rediscovering its roots in the villages and neighbourhoods of which it is comprised. This coincides with the loss of faith in the ability and resources of government to care for the city. With the national Government signalling that it will 'level up' by focusing on northern towns and cities, and local government starved of funds, the business of caring for London is increasingly being shifted to private sector and community organisations. 'Business Improvement Districts' originally introduced to bring 'additionality' to services provided by local councils now find they are expected to deliver basic services like cleaning and security that once were the business of the state. Community organisations, always better at mobilising citizens, now find that their volunteers are essential to feed the poor, maintain local parks and provide legal and debt advice. Meanwhile, significant parts of newly developed London, like Canary Wharf, are almost exclusively managed and maintained by their private owners.

This is a reversal of the 19th and 20th century growth of government that oversaw the huge expansion of London. As this case study shows, there are opportunities as well as dangers in this shake-up of city governance. We can expect the role of citizens in influencing how their neighbourhoods are developed and managed to be hotly contested in coming years.

The success of London's South Bank is based on some 80 years of aspirations, planning, controversy, creativity and (at times) co-ordinated public, private and community investment. It comes with some dangers: land values have risen and developers want ever larger buildings. Local authorities increasingly see the area as a cash cow and neither protect it nor provide the infrastructure necessary to support densification. Few invest adequately in the long-term management and maintenance of the community facilities and public realm which are essential for a successful neighbourhood. We are swimming against a tide, and this will require yet another collective endeavour. Cities need 'gardeners': people and organisations constantly caring for their neighbourhoods.