



## Japan Local Government Centre, London

### Monthly Report for October 2011 – London Briefing: The Docklands, 30 years on

*‘Why move to the middle of nowhere when you can move to the middle of London?’*

- early Docklands ad campaign mocking government attempts to persuade companies to move to Milton Keynes

*‘It will look like Venice and work like New York.’*

- early advertising slogan for Canary Wharf

*“The art of politics is the art of making the impossible happen. And that in fact is what we have been doing.”*

- Margaret Thatcher inauguration speech at Canary Wharf, 1989

The purpose of this report is to give some background context to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) and the redeveloped commercial zone by which it is now best known. The Docklands was the largest infrastructure project of the Thatcher era, alongside the M25 orbital road around the capital (25 years old this month), the Thames Barrier and the Channel Tunnel. The time-limited LDDC was wound-up in 1998 and the term ‘Docklands’ has largely fallen from use as a result of the transformation of the area. However, the LDDC serves to act as a useful urban renewal case study in land use, community relations and the role of intervention by government in the post-industrial economy.

The Docklands themselves were prime industrial land and enjoyed a pivotal function in London’s economy at the height of empire, with decimation during the war and later containerisation of shipping leading to their demise. Dock closures announced by the Port of London Authority in 1970 and rising unemployment led in 1971 to the Department of the Environment and Greater London Council commissioning a joint study for redevelopment scenarios for the Docklands area stretching from Surrey Docks to Beckton. Having regarded the study as unsatisfactory, in 1974 a new Environment Secretary established the Docklands Joint Committee (DJC) as a statutory joint committee of local, regional and central government charged with formulating future land use for the area, publishing in 1976 a London Docklands Strategic Plan. However, sandwiched between the boroughs’ own plans and the Greater London Development Plan it was largely ignored and amid the spending squeeze of an IMF-constrained budget setting that year was rendered inconsequential amid much bureaucratic wrangling between the constituent bodies involved. The potential of this undeveloped swathe of land adjacent to Zone 1 was swiftly picked up on, for instance forming the backdrop to the 1975 J.G. Ballard novel *High Rise* and the gangster film *The Long Good Friday* (1979).

### *Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980*

Following the failure of the DJC to secure political or financial backing, the new Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher opted to introduce a new delivery vehicle to regenerate the area, this time without consideration for the disparate array of authorities which had led to inaction by the DJC. The Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980 of Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine saw the Secretary of State empowered to create Urban Development Corporations (UDCs) as planning authorities, the first and largest of which was the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC). The Act required the UDCs *"to secure the regeneration of its area, by bringing land and buildings into effective use, encouraging the development of existing and new industry and commerce, creating an attractive environment and ensuring that housing and social facilities are available to encourage people to live and work in the area."*

The 8.5 sq miles LDDC area covered Wapping, Limehouse and the Isle of Dogs in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Beckton and the Royal Docks in Newham and Bermondsey and the Surrey Docks in Southwark. It did not have an easy birth, as well as the left-leaning Greater London Council and Labour-led London boroughs of the East End which naturally opposed its private sector focus and centrally appointed board with planning powers, Conservative cabinet ministers such as Industry Secretary Sir Keith Joseph considered it too "interventionist" against their free market instincts. Heseltine however pressed ahead, later recalling his indignation at undertaking a helicopter ride across the Thames Gateway and witnessing the vast undeveloped tracts of land, "6,000 acres of forgotten wasteland".

The LDDC was joined in 1982 by one of the UK's first Enterprise Zones, which modelled on the US example offered tax breaks to companies relocating to the Isle of Dogs. The Enterprise Zone, which ran for 10 years, along with the arrival of 'yuppies' in converted warehouses turned into luxury apartments, symbolised the Thatcherite 'get rich quick' culture of the 80s zeitgeist in Britain, as financial traders brandishing mobile phones edged out the traditional working class East End (as depicted in films such as *Empire State* and TV series *Capital City*).

While the LDDC did not bankroll new development in its jurisdiction, it did possess an array of levers to facilitate and encourage investment, such as compulsory purchase powers to acquire land for redevelopment from private owners, development control powers (taken from the boroughs) and contractual powers to build new infrastructure as required. Proposals such as the construction of a new London City Airport were fiercely resisted by the GLC (which issued a legal challenge) on the grounds that it was for the benefit of City bankers rather than local people and its noise and pollution would be suffered on that basis. The blurry distinction between the government appointed UDC and the boroughs led to constant rows about its legitimacy, as well as its intended effects on the local population, who suffered from historic under-investment but saw little opportunities for themselves in the banking-led solutions preferred by the LDDC and its strategy. While some charged that

the well-being of the Isle of Dogs' population should have been better promoted through education and social services by the LDDC, this was actually a misapprehension over its role and powers.

### *Achievements*

According to the final report issued by the LDDC on its dissolution in 1998, there was:

- £1.86bn in public sector investment
- £7.7bn in private sector investment
- 1,066 acres of land sold for redevelopment
- 144km of new and improved roads
- the construction of the Docklands Light Railway
- 25m sq feet of commercial /industrial floorspace built
- 1,884 acres of derelict land reclaimed
- 24,046 new homes built
- 2,700 businesses trading
- contributions to five new health centres and the redevelopment of six more
- funding towards 11 new primary schools, two secondary schools, three post-16 colleges and nine vocational training centres
- 94 awards for architecture, conservation and landscaping
- 85,000 working in London Docklands

### *Legacy*

Most land covered by the LDDC jurisdiction has now been successfully redeveloped, with many housing projects and office developments created under its auspices entering their second or even third decade of maturity as high end property spaces. The Docklands Light Railway remains in existence and has expanded way beyond the LDDC area into South London and further East towards Dagenham, as well as to the Olympic Park. Despite the often controversial nature of the UDC model and its usurping of elected local authority planning powers, the successes of the LDDC and its eventual acceptance by the local community led to the later creation of a new London Thames Gateway Development Corporation (LTGDC) in 2004 covering some areas of the former LDDC. 100 acres of land and offices around the central Canary Wharf area on the Isle of Dogs is owned and developed by the Canary Wharf Group PLC. In its March 2011 Budget, the Coalition government announced its intention to revive the 1980s Enterprise Zone model on the basis of its Docklands success, with 21 to be created, including in the undeveloped Royal Docks area adjacent to ExCel and London City Airport. For many community activists however, the shining tower of Canary Wharf serves as a poignant reminder that in adjacent neighbourhoods such as Poplar, unchecked poverty remains. A recent seminar organised by the University of East London on the LDDC's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary saw many leading figures and officials of the time convene and agree that much work remained to do to lift the prospects of East London, in spite of the Docklands development and even the Olympics.