Design for London
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I came to London as a six-year-old refugee, fleeing fascist Italy with my parents in 1939. While Florence, my birthplace, is a city that I love to visit again and again, I will always treasure London as my adopted home.

But for many years, apart from its wonderful parks, London was a grey and colourless place, the smogs that swirled through its streets matched by an introverted and segregated social life, where men spent their time in pubs and clubs, and women stayed home. London had great modern architects – many, like Lubetkin, also refugees – but the city of the mid twentieth century seemed suspicious of modernism in general, and modern architecture in particular.

I had studied near New York in the early 1960s and worked in Paris through the 1970s. I had read Jane Jacobs, Michael Young and Lewis Mumford – writers who brought cities, their physical structure and social networks to life. These places and these writers helped me to see a better future for our cities, an aspiration that urban planning had sought to avoid through much of the twentieth century.

When I came back to the UK and became more directly engaged in politics, it felt as though London was losing out. The gradual revival in urban living that was taking place in other big cities was slow to take off. UK government was intensely centralised – even more so when the Greater London Council and other metropolitan councils were abolished in the 1980s – and the quality of urban design, planning and architecture seemed very poor compared to cities like Barcelona, Rotterdam, Curitiba and Copenhagen.

The Reith Lectures that I delivered in 1995, and which formed the basis of Cities for a Small Planet, looked at the role of cities through the lens of mounting concern about climate change following the 1992
Rio Earth Summit. I argued that cities – long seen as the source of all ills – would be the only sustainable way to accommodate a growing population. Only socially just cities, with the density that supports services and vitality, the transport services that can take cars off the road, and the quality of urban and architectural design to move the spirit, could answer the challenges posed by climate change.

The election of a Labour government in 1997 gave me the opportunity, as Chair of the Urban Task Force, to develop these ideas and explore how they could be implemented. The recommendations of our report, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, looked at governance and social justice, as well as planning and architecture. This changed the tone of debate about cities and led to the setting up of new organisations such as the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE).

Tony Blair’s election also enabled the election of a Mayor of London, a major step in London’s revival. Ken Livingstone won – despite Tony’s best efforts to prevent it – and called me in to ask me to make a test case for *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. I had been working as an advisor to Pasqual Maragall, the Mayor of Barcelona, and first discussed a role as ‘City Architect’ overseeing the capital’s planning and regeneration programmes. This suggestion clearly cut across too many established professional hierarchies, so I settled on a different approach – a small team, which would work alongside the existing structures but have a direct line to the mayor.

Joined by Ricky Burdett, who had been pivotal in the Urban Task Force, I set about assembling a team. We took on Richard Brown to manage the team and programme, and Mark Brearley to lead the design work. The Architecture and Urbanism Unit (A+UU) initially focused on four main work areas. Internally, we worked with the mayor’s planners to make sure that the London Plan reflected the principles of the Urban Task Force report (but, to avoid conflicts of interest, we agreed I would play no formal part in taking planning decisions). We also worked with Transport for London (TfL) and the London Development Agency (LDA) to make sure that their schemes were well designed, mainly through pushing them to use design competitions and other open approaches that would give a new generation of architects the opportunity to shape the city’s infrastructure and regeneration schemes.

Outside the mayor’s organisations, the team began to work with local authorities and partnerships to develop a masterplan-led approach to urban change – particularly in east London, where piecemeal development and ill-considered schemes risked throwing away London’s biggest opportunity for growth. We also launched a 100 Public Spaces
programme, modelled on the programme that Barcelona ran around the time of the 1992 Olympics.

Some elements of the programme were more successful than others. Ken Livingstone’s London Plan, which has set the template for his successors, made a powerful commitment to compact city planning. It linked density and public transport, strengthened a commitment to use brownfield rather than greenfield land and included specific policies on design quality. Our masterplanning and urban strategy work in east London began to stitch together a framework for ‘City East’ – a new ‘city within the city’ that could accommodate 400,000 new homes and form one of the foundation stones for the London 2012 Olympic bid.

The public spaces programme had some successes – in Brixton, Bankside, Dalston and Acton, for example. But it was hard to maintain momentum behind some of our more radical proposals, particularly when there was a change of mayor in 2008. The biggest challenge, however, was probably in changing behaviour in TfL and the LDA, both of which were nominally under the mayor’s control, but had a significant degree of independence and were used to doing things their way.

After several difficult debates, Livingstone proposed merging the A+UU (by then comprising around 10 people) with the design teams from TfL and the LDA, so that we all operated under unified direction as Design for London (DfL). Richard Brown left to lead the team setting up the London 2012 Olympic delivery organisations, and Peter Bishop, who had been leading the planning of King’s Cross at the London Borough of Camden, took over as director.

DfL focused on town centres, on housing and public realm design guidance and on regional landscape strategies such as the East London Green Grid. It also continued the A+UU’s focus on east London (Ricky Burdett became an advisor to the Olympic Delivery Authority) and the 100 Public Spaces programme. With 25 people in the team, we managed to accelerate and extend our reach, but Boris Johnson’s election as mayor in 2008 meant a change in my role. Initially, Johnson was effusively enthusiastic about our work, but he soon started pulling the plug on schemes such as the pedestrianisation of Parliament Square (one of the 100 Public Spaces). He made me deputy chair of his design advisory group, but I am not good at sitting on committees; I prefer to work with a team on actual projects. I resigned in 2009, and DfL was shut down (as part of the LDA) in 2013.

DfL and the A+UU operated at the margins of London government, pushing for better practice in a city where the mayor’s powers are heavily limited, as are those of the 33 boroughs. The team achieved some great
projects, including some in previously neglected places like Barking town centre. It created drawings and ideas that changed the way we think about London – from the City East masterplan to the East London Green Grid and the mapping of London’s high streets and neighbourhoods. And it brought a highly talented team of architects, planners and urban designers together, many of whom are continuing to work, as if deep under cover, in the Greater London Authority, TfL, the mayoral development corporations and the boroughs.

I still feel conscious of how much more needs to be done to make London a more civilised and humane city, but the work of the A+UU and DfL pushed design issues from the periphery of urban governance to somewhere near the centre, where they have stayed ever since. Sadiq Khan’s Good Growth by Design programme and the Mayor’s Design Advocates can be seen as legacies of the programmes that we operated. This book is a valuable record both of our achievements and of our frustrations. In its pages, the architects and designers who worked with me at City Hall set out the scope and significance of our experiment, its roots in urban design theory, and the contribution that it can make to the continuing debate about how we shape cities to be great places to live in.

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Richard Rogers was architecture and urbanism advisor to the Mayor of London from 2000 to 2009.

Notes