Selling the story: promotion, publicity and procurement

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Good design is never a given. Many of the people who are involved in city planning, politics or development are not trained in any of the design disciplines and are likely to see architecture as either an impenetrable (and elitist) discipline or worse, a purely subjective field where their personal opinions are worthy contributions to the debate. It is surprising how many politicians deduce that because they may not like a building, it is per se a bad piece of architecture. The same individuals would probably not apply the same logic to the work of an artist or musician – whether one likes or dislikes Wagner, for instance, has no bearing on his standing as a composer. In addition, there are people who view architects with active suspicion – as a group of impractical individuals who are likely to cost the public purse a great deal of extra money.

Design for London (DfL) was fortunate to be working in a period when there was an interest in design quality. The Blair government had set up the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and was promoting a forward-looking vision of Britain that embraced the creative sector. The National Lottery had funded major Millennium projects that included the Great Court at the British Museum and the new Tate Modern. These important new buildings were undoubtedly popular with the public. Finally, a buoyant economy had fuelled a mood of optimism in a development sector that was consequently more likely to take a degree of risk with contemporary design. The mood spilled over into society and many more people were spending their rising incomes on fashion, music, entertainment and consumer products. Design was cool and it was arriving in the city.
The political context

The two London mayors who covered the period of the Architecture and Urbanism Unit (A+UU) and DfL had contrasting approaches to design. Whether Ken Livingstone had any deep interest in architecture is debatable, but he did appreciate its role in a wider vision for London on the world stage. He also recognised that London had lagged behind cities like Paris, Berlin and Amsterdam in terms of the public realm and public spaces. His appointment of Richard Rogers as architectural advisor was as much a political act as an appreciation of his architectural skills. Consequently, the A+UU was seen as a vehicle to push an urban agenda based on the recommendations of the Urban Task Force. Livingstone rarely expressed any views about architecture or design. When he made interventions, it was from a political perspective. He was generally supportive, but if he saw adverse political consequences, he would stamp down hard.

In contrast, Boris Johnson expressed some interest in architecture and design, but from a perspective that was largely based on personal preferences. He was interested in grand gestures and ‘vernacular’ styles of design, and viewed ‘ornamentation’ as a desirable attribute of any new building. This meant that his relationship with Richard Rogers, whom he inherited from the Livingstone administration, was destined to be short. Planning matters were largely left in the hands of his main advisor, Sir Simon Milton, an experienced politician and ex-leader of Westminster Council. He was brought into the Greater London Authority (GLA) as a ‘safe pair of hands’. He showed little interest in design but understood that good design was worth promoting and that the abolition of DfL would send the wrong message. He was therefore prepared to tolerate the team, even agreeing to set up a Mayoral Design Advisory Group.

Creating a profile

The essential difference between the A+UU and DfL was their profiles. The A+UU worked within the GLA to produce ideas and influence programmes and policy. Although it did not seek publicity, it had in fact been targeted by Building Design magazine and accused of manipulating public procurement in favour of a small coterie of favoured practices. Although this was not correct, it was a damaging campaign; it is covered in greater detail in the section on procurement later in this chapter. The creation of DfL featured prominently in the architectural press with
much speculation as to who would be appointed to lead the team. As a profile had been created, DfL decided from the outset to exploit this.

A high-press profile is a dangerous strategy for any public body, particularly as bad news has greater currency than positive stories. The reasoning, however, was that for a team with no defined role within the structure of London government, no budgets and no powers, profile would be a positive asset. This would allow it to deploy the soft power that it had by virtue of its (perceived) direct access to the mayor in order to influence and persuade those in the public and private sectors to divert resources to support its own agenda. It is very unusual for an institution within government to be allowed a public profile and to use this to campaign. It is interesting to note that CABE took a similar approach. This is possibly a reflection of the unique times in which both organisations operated. A second reason for a high profile was that DfL intended to be propositional and not to become an institutionalised part of government. It was given considerable licence by Livingstone to challenge existing practices and promote new ideas. In exercising this role DfL was operating within a broad political context that had been set by the mayor and reasoned that a positive press could be a conduit for disseminating new ideas, engendering public debate and building new alliances. A high press profile would make it easier to promote big ideas for London and to influence others to carry them through. A high profile, however, is always likely to create enemies and at times this turned out to be the case for DfL.

One of DfL’s first actions was to create an International Advisory Group. This was loosely based on the experience of Barcelona. With Richard Rogers as the mayoral advisor, it was easy to attract a high-profile group that included Spencer de Grey, Peter St John, Hanif Kara, Martha Schwartz and Kees Christiaanse. Other members brought in expertise from housing, property and environmental sustainability. The creation of the group coincided with DfL’s official launch party and attracted considerable press interest, thus maintaining momentum behind the new team. The advisory group’s purpose was to extend DfL’s networks and to use them as a conduit to find new ideas and approaches that could be applied to London. The team met four times a year and many members put in a considerable amount of their own time to champion individual projects and act as expert advisors in their own fields. At times when DfL’s future was in the balance, they acted as powerful advocates in its support.

The consequence of a high-profile strategy was that the team was constantly exposed to media scrutiny. The stories of the A+UU’s
alleged bias against certain architectural practices continued to circulate, particularly in *Building Design* magazine. Isabel Allen, who had just stepped down as editor of *The Architects’ Journal*, was taken on as Communications Director with a brief to manage the press and promote the work of the team through publications, events and exhibitions. In the paragraphs below Isabel reflects on her experience in this role.

**The communications game – by Isabel Allen**

As DfL’s Communications Director I was faced with a conundrum. The work, by its very nature, was tricky to capture, let alone to communicate. We were operating in the run-up to the Olympics and the press was awash with controversial soundbites about bold, expensive buildings, along with an endless stream of glossy, computer-generated images. DfL was developing and implementing strategies that were long-term, subtle and rather more elusive. It was concerned with routes and connections and patterns of use, with spaces that were underused or overlooked or impossible to define. Its drawings were often at district or city scale and, however thoughtful the content, however beautiful the execution, it is hard to get people excited about a map. It is harder still to create any kind of stir around the intricacies of policy or procurement, however crucial they may be to the city.

Yet DfL’s Director, Peter Bishop, was absolutely clear about the responsibilities of running an organisation that was funded by taxpayers’ money and whose very existence was dependent on the mayor’s personal support. We had an obligation not just to our city, but to our citizens. Our job was not simply to guide and prompt and nudge our way towards a better city, but to explain ourselves as well – to make it plain to the electorate that the city was in good hands. ‘You are only as good as what you communicate’ was a recurring refrain.

So, we set about the task of finding ways to make our work engaging and exciting not just to the architectural and political cognoscenti but to a wider audience. Our first major exhibition, London: Open City, at London’s Somerset House (*Figure 7.1*), sought to communicate both the range and diversity of London’s public spaces and the complexity of its governance.4

The mood was set by a series of tourist telescopes in the entrance hall. Instead of offering a magnified view of the prospect immediately across the Thames, they revealed film footage of unexpected and little-known corners of the city: a riding school underneath the Westway,
Hackney Marshes – where teams from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds gather to play football against each other at weekends – and panoramas of the Thames at Rainham. An entire wall of the first exhibition room was given over to a complex diagram charting the countless organisations and interest groups involved in shaping London’s public realm (see Figure 0.1 on p. 1). The idea was not to explain how the city was designed but to communicate the complexity of the process – that design was rooted in political brokerage. Another room was wallpapered in life-size photographs of trees in Epping Forest, as a reminder of the extraordinary diversity of London’s public spaces. It was also furnished with a giant postcard rack offering free postcards of each of the spaces included in London’s Green Grid and a stack of maps showing how to find each space. The hope was that visitors would be inspired to see London from a different perspective and explore corners of the city they had never visited before. The exhibition proved both popular and surprisingly adaptable. London: Open City was quickly followed by Open City Bucharest, where we reworked the content for an international audience, and Open City in the Park, where we reworked the content to be weather-proof, vandal-proof and entirely devoid of walls.

While the exhibitions worked hard to communicate the breadth and depth of DfL’s work, their primary aim was to engage and entertain.

Figure 7.1  London: Open City at Somerset House, 2008. Source: Isabel Allen/DfL/GLA.
Our next exhibition at Somerset House, ‘If I Could …’, was more direct in its intent. DfL had been accused by its detractors of being opaque in its dealings, particularly with regard to the way architects were commissioned for public-sector projects. The response was to face this criticism head on and to establish a new Architectural and Design Framework Panel for London government to use. In addition to standard questions about their financial resilience and experience, applicants for the panel were posed an additional question that had been devised to explore their creativity and design ability. The question was: ‘If I could design London I would …’. Applicants were asked to submit a single A1 board to illustrate their idea and this was given a weighting of 50 per cent of the total points in the appointment process (Figures 7.2 and 7.3). This was an entirely legitimate way of selecting architects’ practices, but no one had ever done this before. After much internal debate, the London Development Agency (LDA) agreed to proceed. In the spirit of transparency, open advertisements were placed in the architectural press (including Building Design) and we took the decision to make all of the responses part of an exhibition, inviting visitors to make up their own minds as to the relative merits of the entries and to add their own ideas to the mix.

The response from the public was overwhelming. People came, not only to the exhibitions, but also to the accompanying programme of lectures and debates. They signed up for our newsletters and read our publications. It seemed that we had tapped into a genuine enthusiasm for architecture’s more prosaic allies: urban design, planning, development and public space. More wonderful still, it seemed that the public shared our conviction that spaces shape our culture, that buildings can soothe our souls – that we could design our way to prosperity, to stability, to radical social change.

It was too good to last. It is possible to pinpoint the beginning of the end to one particular day: Friday, 20 June 2008 – the launch of London’s Architecture Week. We had been working round the clock to transform the courtyard of Somerset House into a fitting backdrop for the launch party. The installation aimed to reflect the Livingstone agenda loud and clear and give the message that London’s most hallowed public spaces were being reclaimed by Londoners – that informality and accessibility were the order of the day. We had decked out the courtyard as London’s Largest Living Room: a place for lounging on the sofa, an invitation to ordinary people – ‘whole new audiences’ – to linger in the courtyard, curl up on a sofa, eat a takeaway and feel at home. This being a civic gesture, a celebration of the civic realm, we had gone for civic scale. Everything
was outsize. We had installed a chequered rug of car-park-like proportions, and gargantuan chairs and sofas. There was space to clamber, climb and party (Figure 7.4). This was a cheery domestic counterpart to Sir William Chambers’ classical façades – a sign that standing-up-and-making-stilted-conversation had been consigned to history. It was photogenic, punchy, populist: the kind of quick-hit one-liner that Livingstone excelled at, that politicians like.

Figure 7.2 Images from ‘If I could design London I would … ’: a series of design propositions for London. Source: Isabel Allen/DfL/GLA.
But Ken was out, Boris was in. Boris would now launch the exhibition and make the opening speech. Suddenly the installation did not seem so clever after all. I was due to meet him at the entrance and brief him on the event. We did not know his views on architecture, or on the democratisation of public space. But I had a pretty shrewd idea he’d take

Figure 7.3 ‘If I could design London I would … ’: Trumpets on the Thames. Source: Design for London archive, DfL/GLA.
As it happened, there was to be one final ‘last huzzah’ – the London exhibition at Shanghai Expo 2010. Plans for the exhibition had been rumbling along for years. The LDA had reviewed a succession of pitches and proposals from high-tech, high-profile, high-budget consultants. But nothing seemed to stick. Nobody could agree. There was too much bling, too little content; too many ideas, too little clarity. Time was running out. More to the point, times had changed. With the Olympics around the corner, the emphasis was on delivery, not vision – on tracking costs, cutting back, reining in, tightening belts. There were concerns about recession, unemployment and crime. The electorate (according to the media, at least) was after reassurance.

In this project, as with so many others, the LDA was failing to deliver and had blown most of the budget with nothing to show for it. Ideas that had looked ambitious and impressive now seemed leaden and mundane. Figure 7.4  London’s ‘Living Room’: exhibition for the London Festival of Architecture, 2008. Source: Isabel Allen/DfL/GLA.

There was a general consensus that the emphasis should be on content as opposed to showmanship, that we should view this as an opportunity not
to dazzle and compete but to communicate London’s priorities and direction on an international stage – except that nobody was quite sure what they were. The transition from a Livingstone to a Johnson administration had brought a degree of confusion. No one really knew which messages or policy strands were likely to be dropped or revised. And there was a shortage of cash. The budget had been eroded by long-since-aborted schemes. The budget for packaging, transport, insurance – and a world-class exhibition – was a little over £100,000. By the time DfL was drafted in to organise the exhibition, it was starting to look like an impossible task. To compound matters, the expo was due to open in less than 11 months and London did not even have a venue.

By chance we had met Bill Dunster of ZEDfactory, who also had a problem. He had designed and built a venue but had no content. This was a marriage made in heaven. We adopted a strategy that killed two birds with one stone. The exhibition was conceived as a series of self-contained mini-exhibits, each dealing with a single message or policy issue, each contained in its own suitcase. The great British suitcase brand Globetrotter was persuaded to donate the cases at cost and we started to beg, borrow, steal and commission a series of exhibits to bring the narrative to life (Figure 7.5). Each suitcase had an airline baggage tag on it, LHR to PVG. The suitcase strategy meant that every element could be constructed in London. Each item was potentially dispensable. Concerns about sign-off and approval were brushed aside with the airy reassurance ‘we can always drop it later’. In the event, all the suitcases made the final cut.

Figure 7.5  Shanghai Expo 2010: an exhibition in a suitcase. Source: Isabel Allen/DfL/GLA.
And there wasn’t any need for packaging. We simply locked each suitcase as we finished it and shipped it to Shanghai.

**Exhibitions, promotion and campaigns**

London is often described as a ‘city of villages’. Although there is an element of truth in this cliché, the reality is more complex and more urban. The village is a form of settlement and social organisation that is distinct, bounded, inward-looking and often conservative in outlook. London is actually a city of unexpected juxtapositions, a patchwork of neighbourhoods, districts and places, each with its own characteristics and particular qualities. Although the historical form of parts of the metropolitan area might outwardly resemble the traditional village, in reality it is a series of urban fragments that are diverse, cosmopolitan and tied together through the connective tissue of the city and its complex economic and social structures.

One of the early debates at DfL concerned the nature of London. The team defined London as an ‘Open City’. This captured the essence of London and the fact that one could come to London and call oneself a Londoner, as with New York, but in stark contrast to cities like Paris or Rome, where citizenship implied birth or at least long residence. An early attempt to bring in consultants to define a comprehensive design philosophy and methodology for London failed. After much abortive drafting, it was agreed that a design philosophy could not be simply defined. In any case, the thinking of the A+U that underpinned DfL’s work was far more advanced than that of the consultants who had been brought in.

As well as the major exhibitions outlined above, DfL collaborated with other cities, including Berlin, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Paris and Chicago, to explore similarities and differences in the approach that each was taking on similar issues. This was fertile ground for exchanging ideas. DfL exhibited work at the Rotterdam Biennale in 2007 and then in 2009 at the Pompidou Centre in Paris (as part of the Richard Rogers retrospective), and at the Bucharest Festival of Architecture in 2008. It was also one of the main participants in the London Festival of Architecture in 2008 and 2010.

The City Visions 1910–2010 exhibition was work that the team jointly carried out with their counterparts in Paris, Berlin and Chicago. The exhibition was a celebration of the 100 years since the 1909 Burnham Plan for Chicago had toured each of these cities. It was looking at a
century of planning and at ways in which each of the participating cities was tackling the same pressing problems of housing, transportation, open space, urban renewal and neighbourhood centres. This was the result of the international networks that were being built, networks that allowed for an exchange of ideas and best practice.

The annual property event, MIPIM, gave DfL the opportunity to open up new dialogues with architects and developers. The New Urban Agenda which was launched at a series of events was a simple repackaging of London’s urban priorities. The events were all designed to engage a wider audience and included a breakfast ‘Pecha Kucha’ where invited participants from London and other European cities were asked to present an idea for the future of London in two minutes. It engaged and amused the audience from the property industry over breakfast, but its intent was serious. It was an open dialogue about the possibilities of a city and how they might be realised.

From the outset DfL sought to build a set of loose networks across London. These were designed partly to infiltrate other parts of London government and create points of influence, and partly to seek out and support individuals in the boroughs who were also trying (often under very difficult circumstances) to carry out their own design initiatives. Initiatives like the 100 Public Spaces and the East London Green Grid were designed to co-opt the boroughs into strategic projects, to educate and to extend DfL’s reach and influence. Projects developed in partnership with other agencies were also likely to bring direct support and new funding sources, and to build the political capital of the team. London has 33 units of local government and a decision was made early on to work only with those boroughs that wanted to engage. Some boroughs remained hostile to collaboration and that was fine – there were plenty of places that wanted to work with DfL.

Along with the boroughs, there were also a number of architect practices keen to work with the team both in paid commissions and on an informal basis. Many of the team members taught part-time or held academic posts, and the debate with practitioners was mirrored by a similar dialogue with academia. The importance of these exchanges cannot be overemphasised. They refreshed both the team and the practices concerned and opened up a channel between academic research and government.

DfL’s high profile allowed it to build a positive set of networks with most of the architectural press, particularly The Architects’ Journal (AJ). The editor, Kieran Long, was a keen supporter and understood DfL’s objective of nurturing new talent. London was full of young practices, but
many were finding it almost impossible to break into the public sector due to over-complex commissioning procedures. The opening up of the Architectural and Design Framework Panel, described above, was one way to nurture and develop new talent. Another was to encourage them to work directly with the team. The AJ/RPS scholarship emerged from the relationship between the team and Long. This was an open competition run by the AJ to find three young emerging architects who would be paid to work for six months in DfL on a propositional project of their choice. The AJ would then feature their work. This project was designed to build a bridge with practice and to help to develop a wave of new London-based talent (the Richard Rogers and Norman Fosters of the future). The three ‘scholars’ were Fiona Scott (Gort Scott Architects), Joe Morris (Duggan Morris Architects) and Alicia Pivaro. The bursaries injected new ideas and energy into DfL, maintained positive press coverage, diversified expertise in practices and produced a set of radical ideas that could push the boundaries of thinking without the team necessarily taking ownership. One of these pieces of work was Fiona Scott’s High Street London project (see Chapter 3).

The architectural press also helped to promote some of the team’s key initiatives. DfL had worked with the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and had completed major projects in Barking town centre. The AJ, under both Isabel Allen and Kieran Long, and the Evening Standard, under Rowan Moore, were strong supporters. Moore commented as follows on the work in Barking town centre: ‘A make believe ruin, an arcade with chandeliers and a grove of trees – these are the ways to bring new life and homes to the Thames Gateway.’ He concluded by saying: ‘[N]o one has tried this hard since the Second World War to bring real architectural quality to this place or to revive the old idea of civic pride.’ Even Building Design magazine concluded: ‘That a public space might accommodate such a lavish provision of bespoke design is pretty unprecedented.’ The Barking Abbey Green project came out of this working relationship. The final piece of the jigsaw was a joint project between the council, DfL and the AJ which selected Lynch Architects to redesign the 6.5-hectare Abbey Green and connect the town centre with the River Roding.

The theme of ‘ideas without responsibility’ was developed further with the annual student project. Each year an architectural graduate was invited to join DfL and carry out a project of their choice. The project was theirs, not the team’s, and it was an opportunity to push the boundaries of the politically possible. One of the students, Oliver Wainwright, produced a project that looked at the London Plan viewing corridors to St
Paul’s Cathedral. It concluded that the statutory protected views correlated closely with areas of the city with high property values (Richmond, Blackheath and Hampstead). He identified a series of other viewpoints from poorer neighbourhoods, such as Norwood, Forest Hill and Fairlop, that had no protection. The conclusion that planning policy was being distorted for the amenity of wealthy neighbourhoods was obvious. The final aspect of this broad approach of using advocacy and debate to raise the profile of architecture and design was active engagement with existing festivals. For the London Festival of Architecture, DfL sponsored a programme to bring in international speakers, including Pasqual Maragall, Jaime Lerner, Majora Carter, Torange Khonsari, Lotte Child and Ruth Padel. This programme complemented the team’s extensive international speaking programme as part of the promotion of London on the international stage.

Polemical debate was part of the team’s approach to opening up wider dialogue on issues across London. It was relatively easy to organise, cheap and fun. Furthermore, the association with some of the world’s great urban thinkers added to the profile of the team. Advocacy from within government is rare outside the circle of elected politicians. It was only possible because the team was trusted by the mayor and had the operational independence to take a position. The approach continued when the team was absorbed within the LDA. It was more dangerous to take a public position on policy matters, but as long as this was dressed up in the guise of an architectural debate, it was unlikely that anyone would notice. Like much of DfL’s work, it was a case of ‘continue until someone stops you’.

DfL always realised that it would be a time-limited body. It was just too different (and difficult to control) to last. At critical times, press support proved crucial to its chameleon-like transformations. It might have been abolished with the election of Boris Johnson as mayor in 2008, but instead it was allowed to move into the LDA due to its profile and a sense that it might be useful to a new administration. Many similar agencies and departments did not survive this political transition. When the LDA was itself facing abolition in 2011, it was the press that created a campaign to save it, partly orchestrated by its national and international networks. The Architecture Foundation wrote to the mayor, arguing that it would be ‘short sighted and detrimental’ to disband DfL, and Ellis Woodman wrote a leader in Building Design magazine entitled ‘An Agency to be Cherished’, stating that ‘the potential abolition of this team is an extraordinarily bleak prospect not just for London but the country as a whole’. The AJ ran a campaign to ‘Save DfL’ that was endorsed
by the Royal Institute of British Architects. Building Design published a letter in February 2011 from an international group of architects that included Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Renzo Piano, Daniel Libeskind and Rafael Viñoly. The letter pressed the mayor to ‘secure the survival of this remarkable team. We hope that he is aware of how widely admired the efforts are of this small group of talented designers.’ It is difficult to assess the impact of this level of support on the decision-making within London government, but the team did survive, at least in part, with Mark Brearley taking it into the GLA to work with the mayor’s new design champion, Daniel Moylan.

Narratives, not plans

Mark Brearley summarised part of the approach of the team as follows: ‘do the drawings, win the argument’. He had also coined pithy phrases that described both opportunity and context, such as ‘London is a city of trees’, ‘slack spaces’ and ‘small things everywhere’, as part of his approach to communicate design to a wider audience. To this DfL added the concept of the design narrative. This was a technique for consensus building. Design narratives were propositional frameworks within which more formal planning exercises might fit. They gave individual projects both context and rationale. Planning had become enmeshed in technicalities and legal frameworks, and, although it purported to want to engage with the public, it was largely incapable of doing so. Consulting on a set of regulatory rules is never likely to get much of a response beyond those who find rules and their infinite nuances fascinating. Although DfL was an architecture team, most of what it did was, in fact, planning. The difference was that simple, easy-to-read drawings and engaging narratives could be used to depict imagined futures that neighbourhoods could relate to, get excited by or reject if they did not like them. DfL took responsibility for defining future states that the planning process was all too willing to leave to chance and market forces.

A design narrative is essentially a description: an aspiration that stakeholders and the community can evaluate and, with negotiation, adopt. Making Space for Dalston was an example of a narrative driving local area regeneration and the East London Green Grid of a landscape narrative. The Green Enterprise District and the Royal Docks Strategy were examples of regional strategies that combined spatial, economic and environmental ideas into a simple compelling story.
The working methodologies around incremental urbanism lend themselves very well to techniques that foster public involvement through collaborative design. As DfL gained confidence in area-based initiatives, it honed its skills and those of its collaborating practices to embrace participatory planning. Participatory planning was not new; a number of practitioners had become very skilled at opening up dialogue with local communities and then developing proposals that had broad support. The Making Space for Dalston project covered in Chapter 3 is a good example of this approach.

Another example of participatory planning is the Deptford Creekside Charrette. The Borough of Lewisham had been an active partner of DfL and invited the team’s involvement in Deptford, a historic but poor riverside area that was becoming the subject of intense development pressure. A six-day charrette was held – a collaborative event part-funded by the private sector. A local shop unit was taken for the event and was open to anyone in the community. The objective was to harness the local knowledge, creative talent and energy of the community and produce feasible design options for the area (Figure 7.6). These would be a set of drawn proposals – not a final plan, but rather a starting point for further discussion with the community, landowners and the council to develop ideas further, within a spatial context. Over

**Figure 7.6** Deptford design charrette. Source: DfL/GLA.
the six-day period a multidisciplinary team of 26 architects and planners worked with more than 350 local stakeholders. The resulting proposals were grouped into ‘layers, projects and rooms’. Layers (Figure 7.7) included themed strategies, for example for people and communities, routes and transport, and public art. These themes were then considered against a series of ‘rooms’ that represented distinct areas of Deptford such as the Creek Walk and Waterworks Park (Figure 7.8). Finally, all of the ideas were combined into an area plan (Figure 7.9).
Procurement systems

Public expenditure is rightly carefully regulated in the UK. The notion of responsible stewardship of taxpayers’ money is essential to any functioning democracy. Public contracts are often large and can be profitable, and there are too many examples from across the world where bribery and graft syphon off large sums of money. The notion that public spending needs to be transparent, fair and subject to scrutiny is essential. As a result, public procurement is a strongly regulated, stringently documented process. If appointment to public contracts is perceived to be unfair or biased, it fuels cynicism and a lack of trust in
public authorities. Furthermore, if procurement decisions are successfully challenged, this can have a profound and negative impact on a project’s finances and delivery timescale, and the reputation of the organisation and individuals concerned.

One way to manage these risks is to systemise the process into complex sets of procedures. The risk is that the driver of the process inexorably moves from outcome to audit. As procurement processes become more elaborate and risk-averse, any focus on qualitative rather than quantitative selection criteria, such as a practice’s design ability,
is viewed as suspect and open to challenge. Until the end of the 1980s there had been considerable in-house architectural expertise in the public sector. As capital expenditure decreased, so did the work and effectiveness of in-house client organisations. Open competitions were rarely attempted, and most design firms were selected from a limited approved list of contractors – a list that had in itself been procured along risk-averse lines. Approved lists were often used out of laziness or under the pretext of time constraints. In fact, open procurement rarely entails more than an additional three months, which is purely a matter of good project management.

Rigorous procurement may make sense for large-scale, high-risk, high-value construction and infrastructure projects that cost tens or even hundreds of millions of pounds. The costs of running such processes are small compared to the final project cost, and the costs of participating are offset against the huge fees that can result from winning the contract. However, this approach has permeated the public sector to such an extent that even small-scale or low-risk projects go through relatively bureaucratic selection processes. Large firms have the in-house capacity to navigate the public procurement process. They have dedicated teams, standardised documentation and access to legal advice. Small firms without these advantages find participation in these processes risky, expensive and disproportionately time-consuming. For those that are seeking to build up their reputation through design excellence rather than a rigorous health and safety policy, a certified quality management system or knowledge of procurement legalities, the public sector is not always an obvious place to look for commissions.

A practice’s turnover, risk exposure ratios or internal human resource policies can all be quantified. But design quality is a lot more difficult to assess. Accountants and procurement managers can rarely make value judgements on quality (and many would see this as too dangerous to entertain). The evaluation of design quality is, after all, difficult to do objectively. Consequently, a successful procurement process is more often than not judged by the fact that there was no challenge. The fact that a second-rate architect’s firm was awarded the contract is rarely seen as an issue (and this is in any case a purely subjective view). As a result, public procurement has become ever more cumbersome over the past 20 years. The EU requirements under OJEU need not necessarily be a problem, as they can be applied with a relatively light touch. The problem is that often they are not. A whole procurement industry has sprung up, run by ‘procurement professionals’. While they might understand the process, they know little or nothing
about architecture and design. For them a successful procurement is one that cannot be challenged, regardless of whether the firm chosen is any good.

In addition, other questions have crept into the process, such as data security systems (relevant on government defence contracts but hardly important when designing a park). More recently, local authorities have been asking firms to pay a fee to join a tendering process, or to offer social kickbacks, including the employment of local people as apprentices. These act as a form of disqualification for small firms operating on tight budgets. Similarly, requirements for excessive insurance liability (sometimes set at the capital value of the project) are in effect anti-competitive; and insistence that firms should be able to demonstrate that they have worked on similar projects in the past three years shrinks the pool of those able to compete. What is essential for firms is that the client should be experienced and understand the commercial realities of bidding. Most experienced firms will not bid if there are more than six firms on the tender list, and good practices will be put off if design quality is only a small part of the assessment process.

The UK system is similar to that in Canada and Australia, but as always it is the interpretation that is important. In New South Wales, for example, it is typical for government competitions to weight cost (fee proposal) at 60 per cent and quality at 40 per cent. This is not conducive to the promotion of design quality. Consequently, fees for public contracts have been driven down to very low levels. Current fee levels for government projects are often around 2–2.5 per cent. This is half the rate that is likely to produce good design thinking and execution. In other places, especially in the Middle East, procurement processes can be extremely complicated, costly to take part in and opaque in their decision-making. In theory, procurement processes should be the same across Europe, but in reality, the interpretation of EU rules differs. France tends to be very procedural, while systems vary from state to state in Germany. The German process is generally design-led and offers interesting lessons that were studied by the DfL team. Eva Herr, who worked at DfL from 2007 to 2010, and later worked for the cities of Bremen and Hamburg, has continued to champion the procurement of good architects on city-led projects using many of the methodologies from DfL.

Germany has several mechanisms for including design quality as a key procurement criterion. More recently, the call for greater transparency and community participation has also enabled a degree of public involvement, in particular in urban projects and masterplans.
Well-organized public involvement has strengthened design quality and the public debate on design. Germany has a strong system of competitions, as well as regulations to ensure that independent design expertise forms a prominent part of procurement and competition juries. If competitions are held under official guidelines, architects’ chambers sign off the process. Regulations state that the jury must include more qualified independent members with design expertise than members who represent the client side, cost control and so on. The jury’s chair is always an independent design expert. This is a relatively established process and, while costs, deliverability and durability are taken very seriously, it is design excellence that makes the difference as to whether a project is chosen or not.

Germany makes extensive use of design advisory panels, such as the Gestaltungsbeirat or Baukollegium in Berlin. Cities including Hamburg, Berlin, Bremen and Munich have a high-ranking chief architect (Oberbaudirektor or Senatsbaudirektor) who is involved in major design decisions. Recently there has been a tendency to ensure public scrutiny and even public participation in competitions and design decisions. There are various ways of doing this. For example, members of the public may form part of the jury, either as guests or participants. The presentation of design options can be public and there may be public feedback on competition entries prior to the jury’s decision. The most radical approach is to involve members of the public in the jury and ensure a public discussion and decision. Involving the public does not replace the role of independent architects. The idea is to broaden the scope of the design decision by including a wider range of viewpoints.

Using procurement as a design and publicity tool

One of the roles of government is, arguably, that of sponsor and patron. London had the ability to use its purchasing clout to provide market access to small and medium-size enterprises, and indeed the LDA saw this as one of its stated objectives. DfL sought to put this into practice and provide access for small, local and design-focused firms, where public commissions were suitable. From the outset DfL set out to influence the procurement of architects working on programmes that were managed or funded by London government, the boroughs and other public bodies. Control the procurement, be an active client and good design just might occur. This meant influencing the lottery of public procurement in order to appoint good practices that would be curious, engaged and
ambitious in their work. This would greatly improve architectural quality on publicly funded projects in London. There was a mantra in the team: ‘Good architects can design good buildings, poor architects never will.’ There are good and bad teachers, doctors, builders and car mechanics. The architectural profession is no different. There are many good practices staffed by individuals with flair and talent. There are also many that are mediocre and cynical. In addition, many architects believe that they can design at the city level, but few can. Lee Mallett, writing in Planning, expanded this truism: ‘Many clients seem happy with poor design. Many poor architects seem only too happy to supply it. Many local authorities seem happy to live with it.’

The use of procurement as a tool to improve design quality is a completely reasonable approach. After all, why would one willingly select second-rate architectural practices to work on schemes? However, this raises the problem of transparency. Poor architects’ practices are rarely self-aware enough to recognise their mediocrity and are ready to call foul when they are not selected for projects. Moreover, their discontent was aggravated when they saw a few relatively small and unknown practices getting the commissions that they were not. The A+UU was already viewed by some as being a small and elite unit with close links to Richard Rogers and a small coterie of practitioners. It was tempting to make the leap to assume that there was a ‘black list’ of practices that were being deliberately excluded from public contracts. This was never the case, but the rumours continued. This was a toxic and distracting news story, and when DfL was set up, a decision was taken to address it. There were two parts to the strategy. The first was to ensure that the new Advisory Board was advertised and openly recruited; the second was to revamp its whole commissioning process and to use the press to assist in this task.

Underpinning this was a belief that, although there were many excellent large practices operating in London, some of the smaller ones were hungrier and more innovative in their approach. With a smaller practice it was clear who would be doing the actual work on the project. From a project perspective, small firms were also easier to manage and more likely to produce a good scheme; they had more at stake and their reputation depended on delivering a good project. The idea was to broaden the range of potential bidders, lower the threshold for access to public commissions and help smaller firms gain knowledge of how to bid for public projects. And most importantly, the aim was to reintroduce design quality as an important procurement criterion in the selection of firms.
Influencing the selection of architects was seen as an important way to improve the quality of design projects. A number of large firms had cornered the market and were not being scrutinised hard by the client bodies. Managers took the attitude that they had been used before and, as long as there had been no problems, could be used again. Public procurement is actually quite flexible. It can occur through open competition, through design contest (open or invited), from preselected framework agreements or, on small projects, through three to six quotes against a project brief. For most projects the framework agreement was the best way of operating – but only if the framework contained a range of talented firms. Most of the existing frameworks that were being used had not tapped into the vast array of diverse talent that was available in London, the UK and the EU.

The A+UU had managed to influence procurement of design teams on LDA projects. It had already produced a best practice guide in which it stated:

An open, transparent, competitive selection process is one of the best ways of delivering quality in design. It is not only a legal requirement when public funds are involved, it is also an effective way of getting the best for our built environment. Some of the most successful buildings and urban projects of recent years are the result of competitive selection. The award-winning Laban Centre in Deptford, the Baltic Flour Mills in Gateshead and the masterplan for the Lower Lea Valley at the centre of the Mayor’s vision for the London 2012 Olympic Bid are the products of design competitions. The same is true of many of Europe’s most attractive and sustainable urban developments in Barcelona, Amsterdam and Berlin.31

This practical guide set out the principles of good, open procurement. Architects were included on the selection panels. Ricky Burdett and Richard MacCormac acted as external advisors on some of the larger projects. The A+UU had also persuaded some managers to increase the weighting given to design ability in the assessments. In 2007, on a large housing scheme in Bromley-by-Bow, DfL had persuaded the LDA to award the development to the highest bidder (Barratt), but only if they were willing to change their architects on the scheme.32 The LDA had already agreed to allow DfL to write the briefs, sit on selection panels and include clauses in procurement documents that the LDA could request changes to the design team when awarding contracts. As DfL was an amalgamation of design teams from the GLA, the LDA and Transport for
London (TfL), it was able to extend its influence to the appointment of designers on transport projects as well.

The opportunity for change arose when the LDA’s approved list came up for renewal. Under London government procedures, any of the mayor’s agencies (as well as boroughs and the Homes and Communities Agency) could access firms from each other’s approved lists, which provided an opportunity to introduce new firms. Understanding the Byzantine processes of public procurement might not be interesting, but it was essential if design quality was to be raised across London. The task of understanding and restructuring the process fell to Eva Herr, an architect in DfL, who later stated:

When the LDA’s architecture, landscape und urban design framework agreement panel was procured, there was a strong internal debate as to whether design quality could or should form part of the selection process. This was partly due to intense public criticism and accusations of favouritism ahead of the procurement process. A lot of effort went into dissolving these accusations and demonstrating that design quality could be evaluated in a fair and transparent way that was up for scrutiny. The panel’s EU-procurement was announced widely, not only in specialist publications, as is usually the case. The selection process for design quality was carried out with external independent advisors, helping to dissolve the accusation that internal DfL staff picked firms of personal preference.

The real success was to persuade the LDA to place design ability at the centre of the process and give it a weight of 60 per cent in the evaluation scoring. So that design quality and creative thinking could be evaluated, firms were required not only to submit references, but also to submit a single panel to answer the question ‘If I could design London I would …’. This aimed to test their ability to think conceptually and imaginatively. All submissions were published and the panels were used to provide an instant exhibition at Somerset House (as described earlier in the chapter) that coincided with a series of international talks and the announcement of the procurement decision. The process attracted the participation of many firms that had previously doubted that public procurement processes were worth the effort and cost. They trusted that design ability would be taken seriously in the selection process. Part of the selection process, which was initially perceived as being ‘secretive’, became public. In the end, the decision was not challenged, and nor did it receive
negative publicity. On the contrary, it was noted that the LDA had appointed young and small firms alongside some of the UK’s most reputed design practices. Procurement, for once, became interesting and relevant to a wider audience. The press, for its part, covered the process and considered that the ghost of bias had been laid to rest.

Conclusions

Having a high profile can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allows access to the press to promote ideas and help to recruit like-minded partners. On the other, it can open up a team to criticism. There are only so many good stories that the press will cover before it seeks to find fault. Critical stories and scandal sell more newspapers. DfL took a conscious decision to break away from the low-profile approach that the A+UU had adopted. It was created in a blaze of publicity and saw profile as a means to develop a debate around how London could be shaped. The employment of a press insider, Isabel Allen, allowed it to keep a high profile with relatively little collateral damage. The campaigns, launches, exhibitions and publications were all part of this strategy, as was the content. If the design ideas were edgy and innovative, these had to be portrayed in the images and exhibitions. They were deliberately designed to provoke a reaction and were all written and presented in a style that kicked hard against the dull approach of public-sector PR departments. The communications strategy was designed from the outset to create a new culture of interest in design, and to launch different approaches that would engage with government, practice and the general public.

The procurement of good architects to work on public projects is one of the keys to raising design quality in a city. Practice in Germany shows that when decisions are made in an open manner, with inputs from both practitioners and the public, then good design is likely to ensue. The experience from New South Wales is that processes that seek value for money purely through reducing fee levels are unlikely to produce anything worthwhile. By playing an active role in the procurement process, DfL was able to exert considerable influence and raise the profile of design across London. The panel was able to nurture a new generation of practices and develop wider and more diverse expertise, particularly in urban design. One of these firms was Karakusevic Carson Architects. It was successful in joining the new LDA panel (its exhibit was a series of tape measures that recorded the ever-reducing floor-to-ceiling heights in London residential properties). Because the
panel was used by the boroughs, the firm was subsequently awarded contracts in Hackney, Havering, Lewisham and Brent. Paul Karakusevic of this firm is a strong supporter of the panel system and has stated that it was a lot fairer than basing decisions on ‘who you played golf with’. The panel enabled many practices to grow and to become a pool of mature talent that is still shaping London. Perhaps this is one of DfL’s most important legacies.

Notes

1. Rogers was a Labour peer and had been one of the participants in the 1996 London debate that had led to the establishment of the GLA and a London mayor.
2. Set up by the Blair government in 1997 and chaired by Rogers; see Chapter 1.
3. Such as the Garden Bridge (subsequently abandoned) and the ArcelorMittal Orbit at the Olympic Park.
4. London: Open City was curated and designed with Gerrard O’Carroll, Morag Myerscough, Luke Morgan, Jake Moulsdon and Lucy Sollitt.
5. An installation on the Greenwich Peninsula that was part of the London Festival of Architecture.
6. This is covered in more detail in the later section in this chapter on procurement.
7. A framework panel is an openly advertised and vetted panel of approved contractors. Once set up, it is standard practice for practices to be selected from this panel without the need for preselection. This speeds up the process considerably. Obviously, a panel is only as good as those on it, but a well-selected panel will improve design quality significantly.
8. The centrepiece would have been an interactive map of London where, as one of the consultants proudly explained, a ballet dancer would pop up when you pushed a button for Sadler’s Wells. Uninspiring as this idea was, it was irrelevant as the funding had been spent on ‘creative content’ and there was not even a map, let alone an interactive one.
9. The exhibition was a critical success and was visited by a large number of people, including the architect Thomas Heatherwick and the chair of CABE, John Sorrell. Both left very flattering comments. After the expo closed, the suitcases disappeared, but Peter Bishop later came across them in a university near to Chongqing where a museum had been built to exhibit them! This is now often used in urban parlance and an early example is the Rotterdam Biennale in 2007. Although it cannot be proved, DfL would claim to have first used the phrase, basing it on the title of the Rossellini film Rome, Open City.
10. This is a Japanese presentation technique where 20 images have to be presented in 6 minutes, with the presenter not being able to control the timing of the slides.
12. Reference to muf’s folly on Town Square and AHMM’s housing and library arcade.
15. 17 November 2010.
19. Interview with Mark Brearley, January 2020.
20. See Chapter 3.
21. See Chapter 4.
22. See Chapter 6.
24. The Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) requires all contracts above certain limits to be openly advertised.
25. Reference to muf’s folly on Town Square and AHMM’s housing and library arcade.
26. Typically, a medium-to-large firm will have a standing team and this will account for around 3 per cent of turnover. The cost of the average bid is likely to be around £2,500–10,000 and a successful firm would expect at least a 25 per cent success rate.
For the record, Richard Rogers’ practice never bid for, or was awarded, projects from the A+UU or the mayor.

In 2006 the GLA carried out an internal inquiry into alleged bias in the A+UU and concluded that there was no evidence of bias or malpractice.

Allies and Morrison, Glenn Howells and Maccreanor Lavington were subsequently selected by Barratt and approved by DfL. This was a turning point for Barratt (London) as it proved to be one of the most successful projects that they had built. They went on to do other schemes on LDA sites, including Barrier Park and Dalston Junction, always seeking DfL advice on their choice of architects.

This included Hanif Kara from the DfL Advisory Group.

The GLA still operates the panel and the processes that underpin it. The typical selection criteria are now 70 per cent design quality, 20 per cent price and 5 per cent social value.

Interview with Paul Karakusevic, October 2019.

Bibliography


