

Editorial Introduction

Philip Cohen and Michael J. Rustin

The title of this book, *London's Turning*, refers to the ambition to shift the unequal balance of London's development from the generally affluent west to the relatively deprived east of the city and its region. The history of this imbalance is in part a consequence of London's physical geography which has become overlain with socio-economic and cultural distinctions. To the east of the City of London, the River Thames soon becomes wide and hard to cross – there is only one overland crossing east of Tower Bridge to this day, though one has long been projected and may before long be built. The river flows through flat land which used to be marshy and susceptible to flood; this flood plain offers few vistas and panoramas of the kind which have always attracted the settlements of the better-off, except long views of the river itself. The prevailing wind, and of course the river's flow, is from the west, thus the east got the worst of the city's dirt, in its various forms – noxious industries, waste products, smells, polluted water – while those who could avoid these hazards stayed upstream. Of course modern technology, and indeed deindustrialisation, has made many of these original geographical disadvantages irrelevant today. But their effects live on, east and west, in the quality and texture of the built environment, in the types and locations of enterprises, and in the more intangible but nevertheless influential factors of social and cultural capital, in the capacities of the population to compete with those of other zones of the city for well-paid and satisfying work.

The Thames Gateway plan for sustainable communities to give it its full title, is a comprehensive attempt to tackle these issues. As such it is the largest and most complex project of urban regeneration ever undertaken in the UK. It has been compared, in proportionate scale, to the rebuilding that took place after the Great Fire of London, or to all the New Towns that were built after World War II. It involves the building of affordable homes for upwards of half a million people; the construction of a new transport network to attract people, goods and inward investment from across Europe; the creation of a whole new apparatus of governance to regulate London's historic turn to the east; the attempt to create a sustainable green environment out of some of the most polluted brown field sites in the country. And now, superimposed on this, the London 2012 Olympics

All this is being proposed against the background of widespread public scepticism about master plans and grand projects, coupled with concerns about the impact of global warming on London's flood protection systems, and the fear that market led construction of mass housing will lead to Los Angeles type urban sprawl. Will Thames Gateway be a bigger and better (and hence in some

views worse) version of Docklands? Will the polarisations of race and class that have occurred on the Isle of Dogs be displaced downriver and reproduced in Thurrock? Will the new deregulated regionalism generate a 'space of flows' in which the global knowledge economy and the local hidden economy combine to absorb the communities of labour made redundant by the decline of Fordism? Or will the outcome be new kinds of inequality, new forms of social immobility and peri-urban deprivation?

The Thames Gateway plan has produced a voluminous documentation, much of it frankly promotional, some of simply a collation of existing statistical data, little of it theoretically informed. There is also considerable media coverage, most of it negative, which has contributed to fixing a public image of the plan as an unwieldy, ill-conceived adventure in governmental megalomania. Yet for a project of this magnitude and social importance, it is very research-light. Notwithstanding the current emphasis on evidence-based policymaking there has been little attempt to grasp the impact of the project as a whole or to generate locally grounded case studies.¹ *London's Turning* sets out to remedy this by providing a critical assessment of the 'the Thames Gateway effect'. We trace the genealogy of the plan and explore its limits and conditions of realisation in and through a detailed examination of the problems of urban change it seeks to address. We use the plan as a lens through which to look at a series of important questions of social theory, urban policy and governmental practice, but we are also concerned to look at some of the possible answers.

The book is produced by members and associates of the London East Research Institute. The Institute was set up in 2002 to bring together the work on regeneration being done at the University of East London. The Institute built on earlier work but extended its scope and scale to focus on the Olympics and Thames Gateway.² From the outset we have emphasised the importance of building a collaborative and interdisciplinary research culture which critically engages with the changes that are going on in our midst. This book has not been written from the academic sidelines. The university is a key player in Thames Gateway and the work we do at LERI is produced from a position of direct engagement in the regeneration process.

However in putting this book together and in presenting its rationale we have resisted the temptation to impose any more editorial cohesion on our project than

1 A recent survey of the policy-oriented research literature undertaken by Oxford Brookes University identified a number of sectoral lacuna, but interestingly did not comment on the paucity of generic studies. See Oxford Brookes University (2006), 'Thames Gateway Evidence Review', London: Department for Communities and Local Government.

2 This earlier work appeared in *Rising in the East: the Regeneration of East London*, edited by Tim Butler and Michael Rustin (1996) and *Eastern Promise*, edited by Tim Butler, (2000) and the journal *Rising East*. A companion volume to the present book on Olympic cities. Our current journal, *Rising East On Line* (www.risingeast.org), combines academic studies with topical debates and photojournalism and focuses on regeneration in East London and Thames Gateway.

its subject matter could reasonably sustain. The Thames Gateway plan has elicited much public controversy and the job of the book is to reflect the full spectrum of academic opinion and policy debate. As a result there are many different kinds of arguments assembled here and our contributors certainly do not speak with one voice, let alone provide a common preferred reading of the same set planning texts. The book allows readers to sample different opinions, perspectives, and priorities and invites you to form your own judgement. Some of our contributors are deeply committed to the Thames Gateway project and still optimistic about what it may deliver. The alternatives, they argue, will almost certainly be worse. Others take a more sanguine or sceptical view and suggest that an alternative approach to regeneration is both necessary and possible.

This multiplicity of standpoints has also in part dictated how the book is organised. We are not hubristic enough to think that everyone will want to read the whole book from cover to cover, although our ideal reader – that implausible editorial construct- would of course do so!

We have deliberately designed the contents page to make it possible to pick and choose. But we also want to encourage the reader to take risks – to jump into topics and universes of discourse with which they may not initially be familiar. Thus architects and urban designers will find much to stimulate them in a chapter by a sociologist about the lived demographics of the big move east; equally social geographers will recognise much of their current concerns about city/country relations in a chapter by an architect on the changing forms of East London's urban fabric.

This is not a book just for those professionally engaged in regeneration, although we hope it will have much to say to them. It is designed to make sense of Thames Gateway to a much wider audience who have heard about it more as a rumour, or a news story, than as something which directly concerns them. And that includes a large number of people who live and work in the designated zones of change! Finally those who are interested in more general debates about the direction of change in contemporary forms of culture, economy and polity will find here a rich source book.

At this point it is worth entering a further caveat. Although the book takes a comprehensive view of both the official mapping and lived territories comprised by Thames Gateway, it does not aim or claim to be an all inclusive inventory of the issues raised by the plan sector by policy sector. For example there are no chapters on health, or social welfare, transport, civil engineering or education as such. This is not because we think these areas are unimportant or that joined up policy thinking should not address them. On the contrary you will find many of these issues discussed here as part of larger arguments and analyses about the changing nature of regeneration. We decided however not to organise the book into discrete policy areas but as far as possible to identify and explore cross cutting themes. One of the great challenges posed by the Thames Gateway is to break down the professional and institutional silos that currently exist, as much within the academy as within the world of local and central government

and we have tried to encourage that process in the way we have put the book together.

There is also a method in the madness. We have divided the book into two parts, broadly corresponding to the scope and scale of the contributions. In Part 1 we have asked our contributors to situate the Thames Gateway project within a wider set of debates about different cultures of modernity and postmodernity in contemporary urbanism. Contributors examine the origins and development of the plan in relation to the history of London, Docklands and port cities; we focus on the post-war development of British town planning and the more recent narrative turn in planning theory and practice; contributors also engage with the great debate on sustainability, focussing here on local issues of population density, neighbourhood ecology and the urban fabric, as well as the rhetoric and reality of globalisation. The impact of New Labour's commitment to the cultural turn in urban regeneration, and the role of the heritage industry in the branding of Thames Gateway is another important refrain.

Part 2 presents a series of detailed case studies into the impact of urban planning and demographic change on the material, social and cultural environment of London's growth downriver. New forms of ethnic gentrification, and the development of the eastern hinterlands, the lived demographics of population movement – and immobility – between city and country and, the role which 106 planning agreements play in regulating housing provision, these form a distinctive cluster of studies; the attempt to create new cultural hubs, for example in Stratford and Southend, linked into holiday and night time economies are another focus as is the effect of 'splintering urbanism' associated with the creation of premium sites around new transport hubs such as London City Airport and the proposed Thames Gateway Bridge.

The implications of these changes for redistributive strategies of urban development, and in particular for implementing anything like sustainable community, are drawn out in two concluding chapters; one focuses on issues of land use and sets out a possible policy for regulating the region's economic growth in the interest of all its citizens. In a tailpiece the editors build on some of the arguments advanced elsewhere in the book about the unequal impact of de-industrialisation and the failure of the cultural turn in regeneration to consider ways of tackling the democratic deficit in regional planning. Drawing on some of the ideas which Bruno Latour has recently advanced about how to widen and deepen the practice of political assembly, we make a modest proposal for regenerating the process of civic engagement with the Thames Gateway plan.

As we move into what is proclaimed to be a new political era, where change is the order of the day, and where the issues of affordable housing and the devolution of 'power to the people' has moved to the top of the rhetorical agenda, it seems important to take a longer term view of London's historic turn to the east. We hope this book will help inform the public deliberations that now have to take place if the heroic ambition of Thames Gateway to transform the prospects of the region, and not least of those communities who have been left behind by the

advent of the new economy, is to be translated into social fact on the ground. With so much at stake we cannot afford to fail.