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Our Land: Creative approaches to the redevelopment of London's Docklands

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Dr. Lorraine Leeson is a visual artist particularly known for her 1980's cultural campaigning in support of the communities of London's Docklands and subsequent socially engaged work in East London. Recent projects have been recognised as a London 2012 Landmark, a Media Trust Inspiring Voices award, Olympic Inspire Mark, and RegenSW's Best Arts and Green Energy award.

Our Land: Creative approaches to the redevelopment of London's Docklands

Large-scale re-development of post-industrial sites can easily railroad over the needs or wishes of its existing inhabitants, or at best involve them in peripheral consultation. However, when a community is highly organised and also collaborates with others to gather expertise and develop effective means of communication, it has the ability to re-envision a future that can meet the needs of all concerned. The Docklands Community Poster project engaged with a cluster of waterfront communities in the 1980s, which used the arts to influence the regeneration of the London Docklands.. Close collaboration between local people, activists and artists led to a range of interventions implemented over a ten year period that included a series of large-scale photo-murals, travelling exhibitions, initiatives and events such as the People's Armadas to Parliament and the People's Plan for the Royal Docks. The article makes an argument for why art can be an effective tool in social transformation and highlights its role in documenting and making visible the intangible cultural heritage of the communities it serves.

Keywords: art, regeneration, London Docklands, photo-murals, social transformation

Our Land: creative approaches to the redevelopment of London's Docklands

There has been a lot of talk about land, land for this, land for that. But Docklands is not about land, it's about people. And the birthright of the people is being sold off. Although the people have never owned the land, they've lived on it, worked on it, died on it. It is their heritage – it should be their future.

(Pat Hanshaw, Chair of the Association of Wapping Organisations, circa 1983)

A Waterfront Community

Redevelopment of the urban environment might be led by those with political power, but 'ownership' of land runs deeper. When the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) was established in the early 1980s by a newly elected Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, local people were outraged. It was not only that a new act of parliament enabled this government quango to 'vest' the land surrounding the East London waterfront from democratically elected local authorities, but it also offered no plans for homes, jobs or services to the many thousands of existing inhabitants. This area, now known as the London Docklands, extends eight miles downriver from Tower Bridge eastwards to the Royal Docks, and was regarded by the government simply as highly lucrative real estate. It incorporated land used by docks, warehouses and related industries as well as the housing and public amenities of the communities already living there. In this respect the London Docklands differed in nature to other dockside redevelopment areas in the UK, such as Liverpool, where development mostly covered defunct or derelict riverside sites. When the LDDC moved into its Isle of Dogs offices in the early eighties there were

nevertheless still working docks in the area, many small industries and a population of 56,000 people, mainly living in high-rise council tower blocks with poor amenities.

¹The people of Docklands have a history of social and workplace organisation since its inhabitants have always been subject to the changing needs of trade routes. From the 1850s onwards its populace lived through major upheavals resulting from each successive rebuilding and extension of the docks. By the mid 1960s, having won rights in security of employment and decasualisation of labour, most of the docks were closed and once again this working class community was at the mercy of the market. This time their labour was not needed for the newly containerised cargo, and their physical presence became both an inconvenience and an embarrassment. Keen to fulfil the new Thatcherite vision of the 1980s, the LDDC projected Docklands as a 'virgin' site for development and Reg Ward, first Chief Executive of the LDDC, speaking at a local meeting in 1982 went so far as to describe the Docklands as "a blank canvas upon which we can paint the future".

Proximity to water was a key element in inflating land values and maximising profit. As luxury housing became a prominent feature of the development, a new politics of 'the view' entered the frame. Those who had spent a large amount of money on their river vista did not want this marred by the sight of crumbling tenement blocks and unsightly council estates. Their case was powerfully stated in the theatrical production *A View of the River*, written by East End playwright Alan Gilbey and professionally performed in 1986 with a cast of local people in the warehouses of Canary Wharf prior to its demolition.

¹ The following text includes extracts from my forthcoming book *Art: Process: Change* published by Routledge.

Ironically it was to be the vast Canary Wharf office development that led to the eventual downfall of the LDDC. The ultimate in privatisation, the then tallest tower in Europe was financed from across the Atlantic. It was planned into a scenario which had no current need for offices, insufficient transport infrastructure and was opposed by major voices in the City of London who had no desire to see London's financial centre move eastward. Canary Wharf's developers failed to pre-let even one office space prior to the signing of the master build² agreement. Once built, it took ten years for Canary Wharf to get off the ground, despite its skyward tendencies.

The Docklands Community Poster Project

Before the government's new plans were fully formulated, the highly politicised communities of these waterfront zones had already formed themselves into organisations representing the tenants and action groups of each local neighbourhood. With support from the Labour controlled Greater London Council, these organisations established the Joint Docklands Action Group with a management committee of local representatives. Professionals in the fields of planning, communications and community organising were then employed by this organisation to research and co-ordinate the community fightback. It was not common at that time for artists to be involved in such endeavours. However Dan Jones, a trades council representative on the Joint Docklands Action Group was familiar with the work of artists Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, who had had already worked for several years with trades unionists in East London disseminating information on local health issues through

² The Canary Wharf development was master-planned by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill for the Canadian company Olympia & York, with Yorke Rosenberg Mardall as their UK advisors. The first buildings were completed in 1991.

posters and other cultural means. He invited them to produce a poster that would alert local people to what was to come. Since the local communities were so well organised they were able to undertake a period of consultation with representative groups to clarify what was needed, and it soon became clear that a single poster design was not going to be enough. Posters were indeed wanted, but “large ones” to match the scale of the proposals, plus design work to help with individual campaigns, documentation of the area before it changed and a record of each battle as it was fought. There was also a need for easily accessible information that examined key issues such as housing and other aspects of the development in more depth.

Without funding at this stage, they developed a plan that would deliver art and design work for these key areas, and to deliver this ambitious scheme and founded the Docklands Community Poster Project in 1981. Central to the functioning of this organisation was a steering committee formed of representatives from each riverside area, which met regularly to report on local developments, agree issues to be represented, and consider the audiences that the artwork should serve. A small amount of funding was raised from local boroughs and the regional arts board, finally matched by a significant grant from the Greater London Council. The Docklands Community Poster Project eventually became a community co-op with staff³ employed to fulfil roles of administration, design and technical support. An arts project that began as a request for a poster evolved into the cultural arm of an extraordinary campaigning community over a period of ten years. The images

³ Docklands Community Poster Project staff comprised lead artists/co-ordinators Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, graphic designer Sandra Buchanan, administrators Belinda Kidd and Roberta Evans, with other input from Sonia Boyce, Sara McGuinness, Tony Minnion, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney.

produced during the course of the project became the currency via which information about the events in Docklands was disseminated across the world.

The Photo-murals

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1 **Photo-mural in situ, Southwark Bridge**

Photo © Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, Docklands Community Poster Project, circa 1983.

One of eight 18ft x 12ft (5.49m x 3.66m) photo-murals constructed in and around the London Docklands.

Large-scale posters were the first aspect of the work to be developed in response to the action groups' request. The Docklands Community Poster Project steering group considered carefully who the main audience for these should be - whether to direct their messages to the developers, explain issues to outsiders, or primarily to disseminate information amongst the Docklands communities themselves. It was decided that the latter group were the most important. Most local people were unaware of what was going on, although familiar with the miles of corrugated iron then surrounding what was left of the docks, and all too aware that they had been left stranded in poor housing with few facilities.

The siting of these large images was also important. Commercial billboards, aimed at communicating a simple brand name, are often situated in locations where they can best attract the attention of passing motorists. However, since the information was aimed at local people, it was decided that the posters should be located where they could be seen over time by pedestrians. To this end the organisation contracted the building of the structures itself. The first was constructed opposite a health centre in Wapping, then over subsequent years with further funding from the Greater London

Council, seven more were built in and around the Docklands area. Some were temporary, though at any one time six sites were in operation.

The images themselves were developed with these multiple billboards in mind. They were designed to change gradually through replacement of individual sections and develop a narrative rather like a slow motion animation. In practical terms this meant the images could be transferred from one site to another, enabling the story of the Docklands to unfold through time and space. The name ‘photo-mural’ was first used to describe this work by critic Richard Cork, then coined by Alan Tompkins, cultural activist and Arts Policy Officer for the Greater London Council. Since then it has become a generic descriptor for this art form.

The project steering group initially met on a monthly basis to feedback on issues of the campaigning, any action that was needed, the siting of the photo-mural structures, and to identify the messages to be conveyed. The artists then worked to represent these themes, bringing imagery back to the group to check how well it conveyed its meaning, although the visual representation itself remained entirely their own. This process of decision-making and co-operation enabled a combination of different skills and experience to be focused on the work, contradicting the ‘design by committee’ criticism often directed by the artworld at collectively produced artwork of the time. The hub of creative energy generated in this way sustained the project throughout its ten-year duration and laid the foundations for much subsequent collaborative work.

First Photo-mural Sequence

The first sequence of photo-murals dealt with the issue at the forefront of local people’s minds. What was going on behind their backs? Years of consultation by the

Labour led boroughs had been rejected by the newly appointed LDDC in favour of the practical enactment of Thatcherite policy. The first photo-mural sequence followed the nature and concerns of the campaigning, commencing with a question and then considering the scenario that people could see being enacted around them. “Big money is moving in and is pushing out local people”, explained a trades unionist speaking at a public meeting in Wapping in 1981, so naming the next image of the sequence. A member of The Docklands Community Poster Project would attend every meeting of each campaigning group during that period to familiarise themselves with the issues. At these events activists were often heard to express their ideas through visual metaphor, and these frequently provided inspiration for the imagery. The visual representation of these issues produced by the group also followed the development of ideas. For example, although fear of being thrown ‘on the scrap heap’ was clearly expressed, local response to the first draft of the image depicting this was indignant. The ‘scrap heap’ was seen as the developers’ design on Docklands, not where the communities saw themselves. As a result, this image sequence unfolded to reveal that this scenario truly was a ‘design’ and not a reality. The nature of the campaigning itself was transforming and found new strength in a pro-active approach. The final image in the sequence referenced the relationship of portraiture to land ownership often found in 18th century painting⁴, where aristocracy were depicted against the landscape they owned. This image instead constituted a portrait of those concerned in the Docklands campaigning, incorporating documentation of recent campaigns against their own cityscape. The caption was a proclamation by the chair of the Association of Wapping Organisations about the land being the heritage and birth-right of local people, reflecting the new strength through solidarity being

4 In *Ways of Seeing* (1972) John Berger examines the link between portraiture and property in *Mr and Mrs Andrews* by Gainsborough 1727-1788.

developed by the campaigning communities and making visible their essential 'ownership' of the land.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 2 First Photo-mural Sequence – final image

© Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, Docklands Community Poster Project, 1982-85.

A series of eight 18ft x 12ft (5.49m x 3.66m) photo-murals were created that explored issues surrounding the re-development of the London Docklands from the viewpoint of local communities.

Housing Sequence

Of all the issues affecting those living in the Docklands, housing was the most fundamental to people's lives, and the steering group felt it warranted a photo-mural sequence of its own. However, it was difficult to portray the present day housing conditions of the area without a context explaining the historical events that formed them, and it was therefore decided that housing and history should be combined. This led to an immediate difficulty of representation. Despite visual material for current issues being readily available from the project's own archives, historical visuals were embedded with the ideology of the context that had led to their recording. For example, most photos of the housing of the area had been taken to promote reform – to bring better conditions to the poor and destitute. However, those depicted as 'victims' in the photographs were no less than the forerunners of the resilient and highly organised East Londoners of the present, the very people who had fought against the odds and forged the qualities of community cohesion of which East Londoners remain so justly proud. The imagery produced for this second sequence of photo-murals served as a reminder of this heritage, first depicting the tasks carried out by local inhabitants in their lives, then turning them around to help in with their demands for better living and working conditions. Men are initially shown unloading goods from the ships, while women and children are doing laundry, sewing and

undertaking other piecework from home. In the next image the dockworkers are attending a rally at which Ben Tillet is speaking and the Chinese community is building it's own association, while women are sewing banners, producing broadsheets and spreading information about the day nursery provision set up by the East London Federation of Suffragettes.

To help depict these issues and convey a reality that remained invisible in the photography of the earlier period, the artists used drawing as a counterpoint to photography, taking inspiration from the engravings of Gustav Doré's *London: a Pilgrimage*. In this way photographic montage and drawing were combined, with black, white and sepia used to reveal layers of reality. The second strategy concerned use of text, and a caption was developed for this historical material that acknowledged the role of East Londoners in not only surviving, but also in changing their lot – a hallmark of both their past and present struggles: *The people of Docklands have always had to fight to make the best of appalling conditions – and to change them.*

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figure 3 **Housing 3**

© Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, Docklands Community Poster Project, 1984-86

Third image from the second sequence of photo-murals dealing with issues behind lack of adequate housing for local people. 18' x 12' (5.49m x 3.66m) photo-mural.

The People's Armadas to Parliament

Docklands campaigning was co-ordinated by the Joint Docklands Action Group, set up in 1975 by representatives of the different riverside neighbourhoods. This covered a substantial area however and each location would initiate its own campaigns around specific issues. Initial consultation by the artists with these local groups had resulted in repeated requests for a photographic record of the actions taking place, and constituted one of the Docklands Community Poster Project's central activities. There

were many small campaigns during this period that they documented to create a negative archive of material for publicity, publication and an ongoing record of events. One of the larger and more significant initiatives however was the *People's Armada to Parliament*.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Figure 4 **The first People's Armada arrives at Parliament**

Photo © Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, Docklands Community Poster Project, 1984.

The Armada serves as one of the best examples of the use of cultural campaigning during this period to bring the concerns of the Docklands communities into the wider public domain. It is also an exemplar of the collaboration that was able to take place between local, professional, statutory and voluntary groups. During the campaigning of the eighties, in addition to inviting representatives to their own meetings, representatives of both the Joint Docklands Action Group and Docklands Community Poster Project would attend the different meetings of the federated tenant and action groups around the Docklands area. A comment was made at one such event, that it was time to take another petition to parliament to challenge the imposition of the government appointed LDDC, which had effectively removed powers from the democratically elected local authorities.

Another delegate pointed out that, since both Docklands and parliament were situated on the river, this offered a potential route for delivery of the petition. Someone else spoke up to say that he was a lighterman in Wapping, and owned a barge – an appropriate means of transport for such a journey. There was a further proposal that this barge could be decorated. The idea was taken up by the Joint Docklands Action Group and introduced at the meetings of other Dockland groups, and in this way grew from a petition to a major event. People from each Docklands location wanted to take

part, so the hiring of pleasure cruisers was proposed. There were also plans for what such a large number of people could do when they arrived at parliament. The Greater London Council were approached and provided funding for the event as well as use of Jubilee Gardens close to the pier opposite parliament where the pleasure boats could discharge their passengers.

Delegates from the Joint Docklands Action Group and North Southwark Community Development Group organised the event, while the Docklands Community Poster Project co-ordinated East London arts groups to provide imagery, design and publicity. The main barge was decorated with a large banner for which we created an image that was to become the emblem of the community fight back - a dragon in the shape of the river as it runs through Docklands. The symbol caught the imagination of local groups and a wealth of ephemera was generated that included t-shirts, mugs, letter headings, badges, balloons, and posters.

The Basement Arts Workshop printed neighbourhood banners for the barge and pleasure boats. However, first the main vessel had to be prepared. This was co-ordinated by Cultural Partnerships⁵, who worked with young people to re-paint the entire vessel, hoist the banners, ensure their safety on the voyage and provide tannoy and music. In April 1984 a thousand people took to the river and sailed to parliament broadcasting their message, accompanied by music and songs. It was a moving moment for all involved to hear the Armada's progression up river, cheered on by crowds identifiable by their banners and balloons in the blue and red of the dragon

⁵ Graham Downes of Hackney based arts organisation Cultural Partnerships coordinated preparation of the barge, undertaken with staff and volunteers of that organisation. He accompanied it on Armadas and provided pyrotechnics for its later voyages.

banner, that had come to symbolise the Docklands fightback. At Jubilee Gardens more music, dancing and banners welcomed those who disembarked at an event that combined arts festival with political rally. Ken Livingstone, Leader of the Greater London Council, delivered a welcome speech, and members of the Labour shadow cabinet were asked to explain how they would address the issues affecting the people of Docklands from day one of coming to power. Each politician was presented with a copy of the *People's Charter for Docklands*, reminding them of their pledge.

Three *People's Armadas to Parliament* took place between 1984 and 1986. By this time a host of poems and songs had been written about the issues and at the second and subsequent armadas Cultural Partnerships co-ordinated a barge of musicians, whose sound heralded its progression upriver. Their pyrotechnics expertise ensured that the flotilla of boats that circled at North Woolwich by the LDDC offices did so to the sound of cannon fire. These were emotionally moving events involving thousands of people from different generations and backgrounds who would not have otherwise participated in political campaigning, but who continued to do so in an unprecedented way. Labour and Liberal politicians continued to speak in support of the Docklands communities. Miners' leaders from the UK strike of 1984-85 held meetings with the Docklands groups, and launched a campaign entitled *Don't let the Mines go the same way as the Docks*. Impressed with the Docklands dragon, they created their own 'pit dragon' as a massive carnival costume worn by young people, which accompanied the Armada celebrations.

Although events such as this were not able on their own to create the major shift in political focus that only a change in government would bring, much was achieved on

the way. The Armadas also marked a shift from activism to pro-activism in the Docklands political campaigning, an approach that became a hallmark of this movement. This was similarly exemplified in such initiatives as the *People's Plan for the Royal Docks*, and significantly informed subsequent work of the artists. It also marked a moment where the artists' cultural interventions had moved from the margins to the centre of an agenda of resistance.

The People's Plan for the Royal Docks

Initial redevelopment issues in the Docklands began at the Western end of the designated land. The easterly lying Royal Docks remained largely untouched throughout the eighties. However, plans for one major development in this area were put into motion - a new airport for London, the runway for which would use the stretch of land between these docks and surrounding areas for airport buildings and parking. As with all LDDC initiatives within the development zone, local people had not been consulted. The area was renowned for its lack of amenities, jobs and transport, while most residents were squeezed into shabby tower blocks in urgent need of rebuilding. An airport would meet none of these needs, save for a few jobs for ground staff and cleaners, and would certainly not be providing the kind of transportation so urgently required (Newham Docklands Forum and GLC Popular Planning Unit 1983, 5-6).

As in the other Docklands areas, Silvertown residents were highly organised – a necessity for survival in such challenging conditions - with tough campaigners from all generations. On hearing of the development corporation's plans for the airport, the activists of this area created their own organisation, the People's Plan Centre, which operated from a local shop staffed by volunteers. They approached the Greater

London Councils' new Popular Planning Unit for support. This unit employed key political strategists on its staff, including Sheila Rowbotham and Hilary Wainwright, co-authors of the 1979 publication *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*. Together they took on the Royal Docks case, helping local people to conduct their own research and consultation, access expert input and draw up a comprehensive document. The idea of an alternative plan as an effective oppositional tool was introduced by Hilary Wainwright, who had witnessed the plans drawn up by the shop stewards' combine at Lucas Aerospace, in the previous decade as part of their pioneering proposals for 'socially useful production'. In a similar way, the *People's Plan for the Royal Docks* detailed how the same area of land could meet local needs including those of housing, childcare, the elderly, shopping facilities, transport, leisure and recreation, education and health. The Plan addressed the means through which this approach would create jobs and boost the economy while providing the local resources so urgently needed. The Joint Docklands Action Group was centrally involved, while the Docklands Community Poster Project designed posters, helped stage events, provided a shop sign, promotional board for the centre and design work for the published plan, which was finally distributed by Newham council to every home in the area. There was no comparison between the social benefits of the airport proposal and those of the People's Plan, and Silvertown residents were successful in forcing the issue to public enquiry, which upheld their plan instead of that for the airport. However, the LDDC were answerable only to central government, they did not have to take on the recommendations of the enquiry, and the airport went ahead.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

Figure 5 **The People's Plan for the Royal Docks**

Photo © Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, Docklands Community Poster Project, 1983.

The Docklands Roadshow

The LDDC was the first major urban development corporation to be established by the Thatcher government following their return to power in 1979. It was regarded as a test bed where conservative policies could be enacted without recourse to local democratic processes. Requiring a special act of parliament, this was finally passed through both parliamentary houses after much deliberation in 1980. New Urban Development Corporations were being set up all over the country, and as the London re-development progressed, the communities of Docklands decided to send a warning and the benefit of their campaigning experience to other regions facing a similar situation.

To this end, late in the eighties, the exhibitions, photo-murals, photographs, posters, banners, leaflets, articles, plans and other documents produced during the course of the Docklands campaigning were organised together under the banner of the Docklands Roadshow. A package was offered to other locations where development corporations were due to be imposed. As part of this an exhibition of the work of the Docklands Community Poster Project, accompanied by speakers including community activists and professionals, could be hired to bring relevant advice and information from a community perspective to other locations. The Docklands Roadshow toured in various combinations. In 1988 the visual material was shown at the annual conference of Shelter in Nottingham and at the *Future* exhibition at Dock Warehouse in Amsterdam. The following year it went to Bethnal Green Library, followed by an extensive event at Stratford Town Hall in Newham, and finally exhibited as part of *Urban Renewal in England* at the Technische Universität, Berlin and Barbican Centre, London in 1989.

* * *

The Docklands Community Poster Project did not set out to create legacy, however it is so often the cultural artefacts that are left to relate hidden histories. Posters and ephemera from the campaigning are now housed in the Museum of London Docklands, and the archive of photographic negatives that was originally created as a resource for local people and the media is now the only record that the museum holds documenting the Docklands campaigning from a community perspective. Thirty years on, documentation and versions the photo-murals continue to be exhibited on a regular basis, and the few remaining copies of the *People's Plan for the Royal Docks* have become widely valued as a model of effective community-led consultation. Most recently it has been featured in an article entitled 'The People's Plan: Participatory and Intellectual Democracy' published by the architectural practice We Made That (Martin 2016, 10-11).

The people's story of the growth of the London Docklands is not however the major visible narrative of this area in the present day, where historical references have been reduced to a scattering of cranes and bollards between soaring office blocks, apartments and riverside restaurants. Despite its 'alternative' status, the people's story of the resistance in Docklands is nevertheless resilient and spreading. A growing spirit of activism, particularly amongst younger generations, is seeking to excavate earlier models of organisation and dissemination, and to re-invent these for new circumstances. At the same time a greater acceptance of art as a social tool is supporting cultural forms that can help bring the voice of communities into the public domain. The Docklands dragon in the shape of the river – an image originating as an

emblem of the People's Armadas and reproduced many times over on letterheads, badges and ephemera – was an apt symbol for this community's fightback. The dragon is a personification of all the elements, an embodiment of primordial power and in our own culture has been used represent the underworld against the state, as in the tale of Saint George and the dragon. The use of the imaginary and the cultural forms which hold and communicate the ideas – the photomurals that played out a community's concerns and vision, the armadas that reminded locals and others of the power of collective action – have a role to play in making these issues tangible so that others may engage with them. The arts are a medium well equipped to give form to ideas and vision and in that process are also able to make visible the way that aspects of the past inform the present, as in the photo-mural *Housing* sequence. Revealing hidden cultural heritage is therefore one way that artists can support communities struggling to survive and assist the process of re-envisioning our cities' futures.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

Figure 6 **Dragon Banner from the People's Armadas to Parliament**
© Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, 1984.

A Role for Art in Social Transformation

The Docklands Community Poster Project offers an example of how art can support communities and act as a political force to provoke reform. In the London Docklands local people from three London boroughs in effect took on central government⁶ to oppose, and then provide workable alternatives to turning a site where generations of working class people had lived and worked, into real estate to be sold off to the highest bidders. Theirs was not a simple message to communicate however. The campaign adopted more sophisticated strategies to that of being straightforwardly

⁶ The London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) was appointed to oversee the re-development of the London Docklands by the 1979 Conservative government, to which it was directly answerable. Under a new act of parliament the land was transferred to their control from the Labour controlled local authorities, which received no recompense.

oppositional, and proposed ways of developing the area that would include local needs and infrastructure. There was also awareness of how this massive development would engage with the wider global economy of the capital, and the visual strategies therefore had to not only reflect this complexity, but also communicate the issues in diverse ways for various audiences. In order to achieve this, the artistic practice needed to be embedded in ongoing dialogue with the activists, community members and professionals involved, a process that eventually led to a programme of photo-murals, graphics, travelling exhibitions, events and photographic documentation. The art did not lead the campaign, but it became an increasingly important part of it, disseminating information amongst local people and to a much wider public.

If art is a purveyor of meaning, then the cultural work supporting this campaign helped locate the meanings of this development for both local people and a wider society. More people joined the cultural events⁷ than would have otherwise taken part in demonstrations, exemplified by the thousands who took to the river for the *People's Armadas to Parliament*. The imagery also gained a currency that saw it repeatedly reproduced through the media. At the time it was, for example, used to illustrate 'Bleeding Docklands Dry' published by the Joint Docklands Action Group in *The Chartist* (1983) and *London Labour Briefing* in 1984. It was also used in textbooks featuring Docklands development such as *Geography Today* and *People in the Urban Landscape*, a GCSE Geography text book, published by Collins in 1987 and 1989. The images have continued to be used for similar purposes, and as recently

⁷ The cultural work for this campaign was not just carried out by the Docklands Community Poster Project. Other individuals and organisations produced songs, poems and theatrical performances, took photographs and turned political rallies into community festivals.

as 2016 the *No Airport in Newham* poster was featured by Oxford University Press in *A Level Geography for Edexcel*.

Nabeel Hamdi (2004) has demonstrated how change starts where one is, and developed from there can rival the sweeping political changes of those holding political power. This highlights the benefits of a 'situated' art practice which is able to engage in the politics of specific circumstance, and extend out from there. Chantal Mouffe (2005, 39) has furthermore described how the political erupts in very different places and not only through democratic structures. With reference to Ulrich Beck's theory that society should no longer look for the political in the traditional arenas of parliament, political parties and trades unions, she has asserted that it is necessary to stop the equation between politics and the political system. Mouffe pointed instead to a series of new resistances that are grass roots-oriented, extra parliamentary and no longer linked to classes or to political parties. She claimed that these demands have been taking place through a variety of sub-systems on issues that cannot be expressed through traditional political ideologies, and are shaping society from below. In their *Third Text* article of 2008 'Whither Tactical Media', Gene Ray and Gregory Sholette highlighted a similar need for cultural activism to shift its emphasis to recognise a new social order that is calling for a 'do it yourself' form of tactics. These strategies are reflected in two distinct and sometimes overlapping forms in the community-based work of the artists' subsequent practice. Both were originally learned through the engagement with the activists of the Docklands Community Poster Project and other campaigning projects of that time.

The first tactic has been that of ‘giving voice’, one of the key remits of community arts, and articulated by Sandy Fitzgerald (2004, 79) as “the question of power and the right of people to contribute to and participate fully in culture, the right to have a voice and the right to give voice”⁸. Art offers an effective means of creating platforms in the public domain where these voices can better be heard, while targeting those who need to listen. Simply being heard can have a transformative effect as noted by Paulo Freire (1970, 119), who referred to the inward realisation of his ‘educands’ of their own inherent power to change both themselves and what is around them. The second main strategy has been the creation of alternative models, which the Docklands communities found to be more effective than oppositional campaigning. *The People’s Plan for the Royal Docks* put forward options significantly more beneficial to the local community than the proposed London City Airport, taking lesson from the plans drawn up a decade earlier by the shop stewards combine at Lucas Aerospace. Both strategies bring the practices, knowledge and skills of local people into the wider social sphere so that the ‘intangible heritage’, the political, social and cultural experience of those least heard in society, can enter and affect public discourse.

It is always difficult to assess the social impact of arts projects. Even the most sensitive qualitative evaluation cannot account for those moments when some active involvement by a young person bears fruit in later life, or when a community in London or Brazil is inspired by learning of the experiences of the other. Proof is perhaps more the concern of academics, policy makers and funding agencies, since

⁸ It has been argued that ‘giving voice’ is somewhat of a misnomer, since communities are often very clear about what they want, it is rather if or how they are listened to that is more the issue.

one can only really tell experientially how wide the ripples of a project may have spread. Catherine Wilson (2008, 6) commented that the possibility of artists influencing wider actions and thinking is as infinite as the creative process itself, noting particularly that social outcomes rely on nodes of interaction in the wider public realm that the artist does not control.

If the campaigning over the London Docklands were to be judged in terms of the final redevelopment as a whole, it would not necessarily be deemed as successful⁹. Its strategy for cohesive community activism involving the arts is nevertheless one that is frequently referenced as a model, and would have certainly made impact on a much greater scale, had it not been for three successive terms of a Conservative government. A significant shift can however be seen in the cultural work over this period. The artistic intervention in the Docklands resistance gradually came to be regarded as a key tool in the campaigning strategy, and the process of taking a cultural approach to demonstration and events became accepted as the norm. As with the Lucas Aerospace plan, it has seemed to gain an after-life as the artwork continues to be exhibited and published while others draw on the knowledge gained and re-use it to inform future initiatives. Art cannot necessarily make change, but it can take vision to the brink of where change is possible.

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⁹ Despite falling short of its main objectives, the Docklands campaigning achieved a number of small but significant victories including preventing destruction of the heart of Wapping by a trunk road, achieving housing for rent along the riverside at Cherry Gardens in Southwark, saving the Mudchute City Farm from destruction and forcing the issue of the proposed airport to public enquiry through production of the Peoples Plan for the Royal Docks.

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