LONDON’S TOWNS

Shaping the polycentric city
25 Sept - 15 Nov 2008
New London Architecture
The Building Centre
26 Store Street
London WC1E 7BT

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London beyond the centre is home to a rich and diverse mixture of towns, neighbourhoods and communities that help make our city the exciting place it is. It includes prosperous green and leafy suburbs, but also places facing deprivation amongst the worst in the country.

Making sure outer London lives up to its full potential as a place to work, live and enjoy is vital if London is to meet the challenges of population and employment growth while also acting on imperatives like climate change. That is why I have flagged planning for outer London as a major priority, which will be backed by a Mayoral Commission later in the year.

"London's Towns" raises many of the questions we will have to address, and shows what can be achieved with imagination and hard work. It is a good start to the discussion, exchange of ideas, policy-making and delivery on the ground that we will need to make the kind of change our city - and its towns - needs.

Boris Johnson
Mayor of London
The Mayor’s ‘blue doughnut strategy’ won him the mayoralty. Johnson was elected not by central London, but by the outer districts like Bexley, Bromley, Ealing, Kingston and Barnet.

So it was not surprising that in the Mayor’s first declaration of intent on planning in the capital, he makes it clear that outer London will be a higher priority than it was with his predecessor. In Planning for a Better London, published in July, Johnson outlines his approach. Although he will target disadvantage in inner London and publish a planning framework on the major topics affecting it, more emphasis will be given ‘to issues affecting outer London and ways of realising untapped potential there.’ Outer London is the place where most Londoners live and work, so the new regime is aiming to improve the ‘liveability of the huge variety of places and neighbourhoods that make up outer London’.

Part of that picture is reducing the distance between where people work and where they live, with a bid to bring more jobs to the outer zones. Johnson aims to reduce strain on already congested transport links into central London and will be establishing an Outer London Commission to identify ways of ensuring this significant zone of the capital becomes less of ‘an all too-often overlooked asset’. This exhibition looks at plans and projects already underway to support the economies of London as a polycentric city.
In his major study on the capital - London the Unique City - the Danish academic and anglophile Steen Eiler Rasmussen wrote 'Two chief types are distinguishable among large cities: the concentrated and the scattered. The former is the more common on the continent.....The second is represented by the English town, which now seems to many of us the ideal....and London is the very type of the scattered city.'

Rasmussen neatly describes the difference between Livingstone and Johnson's planning strategies. The former mayor, advised by Richard Rogers had a vision of a dense European city as a model for the development of London.

Johnson's desire to give greater autonomy to the boroughs recognises that London is polycentric; a 'city of villages' and a network of town centres each with its own character and style.

While the City and Westminster form the core of the historic capital, towns like Kingston upon Thames boast an equally ancient lineage. On the site of the first crossing of the river upstream from London Bridge, the town appears in the Domesday Book and received its first charters from King John in 1200. Romford has been a market town since 1247. As the railways and underground system promoted commuting into the centre so these towns attracted suburban development - lower density housing with gardens and increasingly dependent upon the motor car. The 1930s saw the huge expansion and the heyday of the suburbs.

But in recent years the outer London areas have not been doing well in comparison to the central area or the outer metropolitan region. As Professor Ian Gordon of the LSE wrote in 2006 “a standstill in outer London employment numbers threatens the sustainability/recovery to viability of outer London commercial centres, some of which could have an important role to play in a more polycentric future London economy.”

It is a model that needs to adapt to meet the needs of the sustainable city - it does not make sense to have employment growth in the centre thus encouraging more commuting. The Urbed report ‘Over the Edge - Town centres and the London economy’ says that ‘considerable efforts are needed to reverse trends in outer London and to deal with new patterns of economic activity, residential settlement and movement.’ London 'needs to make full use of all its assets if it is to attain its aspiration to become an 'exemplary world city.'